PITY, PROTEST AND PROFIT:
LOCAL PERCEPTIONS OF TRANSIT MIGRANTS IN BOGOVAĐA, SERBIA

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ABSTRACT

The present thesis discusses attitudes of the local population towards transit migrants in Bogovadja, Serbia. While there are many studies both on transit migration and transit zones, and on attitudes of natives towards migrants in heterogeneous contexts, there is very little research on how local populations perceive and interact with migrants who are just passing through. This thesis looks at Bogovadja as a place of transit and examines how locals react to and behave within this transit zone. Based on ethnographic field research with a combination of interviews and observations, the present study finds that different actors view the transit zone and the migrants within it different ways: as humans to be pitied, as problem-causers to be protested against, or as clients to be profited from. The study concludes that the marginalization of the migrants and the temporaryness of their stay rarely allows for more nuanced perceptions and interactions between locals and migrants.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Ethnographic Vignette

In early November 2014, a demonstration took place in the tiny village of Bogovadja in western Serbia. Locals protested against the presence of the center for asylum seekers that is located in a facility of the Serbian Red Cross at the edge of the village. Several large Serbian news portals reported on the demonstration, citing protesters who claimed that "large numbers of asylum seeker and illegal migrants from African countries" endangered the safety of the local population. The head of the local council was quoted saying that locals are afraid of Ebola, and that the presence of the migrants, but also of the many "rude and illegal taxi drivers who bring them to Bogovadja", disquiets them so much that they cannot sleep at night.[1]

My first visit to Bogovadja took place two days after that protest. Together with a friend, we arrived by taxi from the nearby town of Lazarevac, and on the way we asked the taxi driver about the protest; to our surprise, he hadn't heard about it. He assured us that there "were no problems at all" with the migrants in Bogovadja, and that those people who had organized the protest were probably just "crazy". Although he was himself from Lazarevac, he seemed to know everything about Bogovadja and the migrants there: "they are good people, I know because I drive them around all the time", he said and added that the migrants were polite and friendly and that they always left him a tip, something which locals never do. He dropped us off near the asylum center, and we agreed that we would give him a call later to pick us up.

At the edge of the village, we started chatting with an old lady who was tending to some late-season vegetables in her garden. I asked her about the protest, but she hadn't attended it either. She told me that some people in the village didn't like the migrants because they throw their trash

[1] Meštani traže iseljenje azilanata iz Bogovađe. *Blic,* 02.11.2014.

out by the side of the road, but added that this was not the fault of the migrants but rather of the municipality – why didn't they put up any trashcans?

As we continued talking, it turned out that she in fact had quite a lot of personal experience with the migrants. Young men who pass by her house help her with chores in the garden and around the house, and in turn she cooks coffee for them. Once, she told me, came into the garden to find several migrants there picking her pears – "but I understand this", she said, "I love fruit, and if I wouldn't have any fruit to eat I would also go and pick it somewhere". Instead of sending the migrants away, she gave them a ladder and asked them to pick the pears from the top branches that she couldn't reach herself. She also said that once the police had come to the village and told her that migrants were not allowed to be in private yards. This didn't bother her too much though; "I just move the coffee table behind the shed and tell them to sit there", she told us with a cunning smile. We were surprised; she certainly didn't seem to be spending sleepless nights out of fear of dangerous "African migrants".

In the center of the village, we noticed several announcements stuck to the bus stop that functions as a noticeboard: a sign reading "WARNING – NO GARBAGE" in English, French and Arabic, and two announcements from the local council: One of them was a short announcement of the protest on November 2nd; the other announcement was from October 2014 and read:

> BECAUSE OF THE FREQUENT AND EVER MORE SERIOUS PROBLEMS IN THE VILLAGE, WHICH, CONTRARY TO THE PROMISES OF THOSE RESPONSIBLE, HAVE NOT BEEN SOLVED THE LOCAL COUNCIL OF BOGOVADJA INVITES ALL VILLAGERS TO AN ASSEMBLY IN ORDER TO CONTINUE THE FIGHT FOR OUR RIGHTS AND FOR OUR LOST PEACE!!!

The dramatic tone of this announcement gave me the impression that there must after all be some villagers who really cannot sleep at night because of the migrants; at least the members of the local council, who called for the assembly, must have been extremely concerned. But these first encounters in Bogovadja also taught me that what news portals presented as the opinion of *the*

locals was in fact just the opinion of some of the locals; perhaps even just the opinion of a very vocal minority.

1.2. Bogovadja as a transit place

Bogovadja, with only 470 inhabitants, is home to the largest asylum center in Serbia, which is set up to accommodate up to 170 asylum seekers. Migrants pass through there as they make their way from the Middle East or from Africa towards the European Union. Some of them stay in the asylum center for several months, but the majority travels on within a few days or weeks; for the overwhelming majority of migrants, seeking asylum is mainly a way to legalize their status in Serbia, and staying in the asylum center in Bogovadja gives them the chance to rest and make plans for further travel. Bogovadja is a good place to make such plans, since it gives migrants the chance to exchange experiences with others and to listen around for travel options. Besides this, an abundance of taxi drivers offer their services to the migrants: they drive them to the next larger town, Lazarevac, for shopping or going to the Western Union office – but many of them are also willing to take migrants all the way to Subotica (on the Hungarian border), and to instruct or arrange for them to cross the border into the EU. Most migrants who come to Bogovadja come there because of these possibilities and services; some of them then try register with the police as asylum seekers, while others travel on immediately. Of those who try to register, some succeed and some don't; the authorities don't always work as they should, and because of this many migrants in Bogovadja do not receive accommodation in the asylum center, but are forced to sleep outside. In 2012-2013, the asylum center was chronically full, and migrants set up camp in the forest, in abandoned huts and houses or in empty weekend cottages around the asylum center, even in the middle of winter; at some point there were several hundred migrants sleeping rough, almost outnumbering the permanent inhabitants of Bogovadja. While the situation is less

dramatic today, migrants sleeping in the forest are still a common occurrence. This situation leads to protests by the local population – but, as can be seen from the experiences recounted above – the reactions of locals towards the migrants are much more varied and diverse than might be expected.

1.3. Approach and structure

This thesis takes an ethnographic approach and examines the situation in Bogovadja from the local population's point of view. It is based on in-depth fieldwork including participant observation, formal and informal interviews. I use the concept of a transit place to designate that Bogovadja is a transit *hub* for migrants on the one hand, but also a permanent *place* of residence for the local population. I ask how the local population perceives this transit place and the migrants who move within it, and examine the various reactions and discourses that result from this.

Following this introduction is Chapter 2, which presents the theoretical framework and discusses two separate concepts that can be applied to the situation in Bogovadja: First, I critically examine the definitions and use of the term "transit migration" and introduce the notions of the "transit zone" and the "transit place". Secondly, I discuss theories and studies that are concerned with attitudes towards migrants, in particular in places where migrants and locals live together in close proximity, and I argue that while these phenomena have been studied by many, few have considered a situation where migrants are in transit and where there is therefore a constant "flow" of people coming and leaving again.

I then move on to introducing the context in Serbia and in Bogovadja in more detail in Chapter 3. After giving an overview of both the official and the unofficial systems within which migrants in

Serbia travel and stay, I zoom in on Bogovadja and on the asylum center there, and "conclude" with a detailed map of the area.

Chapter 4 describes the methodology that I applied, both during fieldwork and in the analysis of my data. It includes detailed tables of all my interview partners.

In Chapter 5, I continue with a detailed introduction of Bogovadja as observed by myself and described to me by locals, including important places and events that shape discourses and interactions within the village. Following that, I present the different experiences and topics that locals brought forth, and I categorize them into three aspects of the migrants' presence in Bogovadja: negative aspects, positive aspects, and business aspects. I show that while most interviews brought up each of these aspects, different people put the emphasis on different aspects. Those who brought up mostly negative aspects are focused on problems in and around the village, for which they don't blame the migrants, but mainly state actors and taxi drivers. Meanwhile, those who brought up mostly positive aspects base these on direct experiences and interactions with migrants, while those who are focused on business have a more pragmatic approach that cannot be categorized into positive or negative.

Chapter 6 moves away from this more descriptive to a more analytical approach, and examines the various and sometimes conflicting discourses among locals and between locals and other actors. In a first step, I examine perceptions and discourses on the transit zone and about Bogovadja as a transit place and on the various actors within that zone, and point to conflicting discourses between state actors and locals, as well as between "business" and "non-business" locals. In a second step, I look at how these perceptions reflect on the perceptions of the migrants who move within that zone, and consider other factors that influence the local populations' perception of the migrants. I argue that some locals have a more positive image of migrants, while others have a more negative one, depending on their individual interpretations of certain

experiences; however, many locals are not aware of these conflicting perceptions within the village, since they all agree in their criticism of state actors and taxi drivers. I conclude the chapter with a discussion on how these discourses shape the image of migrants within and beyond the village, and finally by integrating my data with the theories discussed in Chapter 2.

Chapter 7 concludes the thesis by discussing the larger implications of my findings both for research and for actions and policies.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This thesis is based on two separate notions. On the one hand, it is a study of a transit hub within a larger "transit zone", a place where migrants arrive, stay for some time, and leave again. On the other hand, it is also a study of a "heterogeneous area" where two separate groups – migrants and locals – live in close proximity to one another, and where there are therefore opportunities for contact, but also potential for conflict. In this chapter, I first discuss these notions separately, and then bring them together and ask what the implications are of migrants and locals living together in close proximity in a place that is also a major hub within the transit zone.

2.1. Transit migration, transit countries, transit zones

2.1.1. The politicized notion of "transit migration"

There is no commonly agreed-upon definition of "transit migration" (Düvell 2012, Zbinden 2013) despite widespread usage in both academic and policy circles. Collyer et al (2012) write,

> "The term 'transit migration' can be seen as an attempt to group a heterogeneous array of migration processes, migrants, potential migrants and countries around a limited series of largely undefined commonalities involving illegality, high risk, lack of control and above all an assumed desire to reach European territory."[2]

The terms "transit migration" and "transit migrants" comprise various phenomena; whether or not a migrant transits, stays or returns depends on several factors, including the migrant's intentions but also conditions in the transit country as well as its borders. "Transit countries" are also, in most cases, emigration and immigration countries, and whether they become predominantly transit countries depends on the policies and conditions within the country (opportunities for integration) as well as in the neighboring states (attractiveness for migrants, border regimes).[3]

[2] Collyer et al (2012), p. 411.
[3] Düvell (2012).

In the language of states and interstate agencies such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), "transit migration" is often applied to irregular and unwanted migration towards the European Union (Collyer et al 2012). Sabine Hess (2012) argues that the IOM in fact had an active role in coining the word "transit migrant" in the early 2000s, and applying it to foreign nationals in countries around the European Union as a way to externalize the EU migration regime and establish a "buffer zone" around the EU.[4] On the other hand, countries such as Ukraine "relabel" economic migrants from distant countries as "transit migrants", indicating that their long-term settlement is not encouraged and urging them to move on (Collyer et al 2012). Some researchers prefer not to use the term "transit migrant" at all because of its strong negative connotations and the risk that it will be used to legitimize restrictive policies.[5] However, as Düvell writes: "In the countries on the fringes of Europe [there are] migrants from distant countries (...) who enter these countries with the clear intention (i.e. efforts are made to leave the country) to only stay for a limited period of time before moving on to an EU member state."[6] With this narrow and coherent definition, the phenomena of transit migration can be studied.

2.1.2. Alternatives: the transit zone and the transit place

Rather than speaking of "transit migrants" and clearly delineated "transit countries" (which has similarly negative connotations in policy discourse), Sabine Hess (2012) suggests the term "transit zone", a concept that comprises the complexities of migrant biographies and allows for a consideration of different types of migrants. This definition suits my purposes well, because it takes the emphasis away from national borders and shifts it towards viewing the wider land around the EU as a "border zone" with different places within the zone. The place that I study – Bogovadja – functions as a transit hub within the larger transit zone; however, I prefer to use the

[4] Hess (2012), p. 432.
[5] Düvell (2012), p. 424.
[6] Ibid.

term "transit place", since the word "hub" in common parlance lays the emphasis on movements from and to this hub, while the term "transit place" implies that there are both people who transit through (migrants) and people who stay in this place (locals). Defining Bogovadja as a "transit place" is therefore well suited to studying the movement of migrants in this place from the local populations' point of view.

2.1.3. Attitudes towards migrants in transit zones

There is little available research on the relationship between natives and migrants in transit zones, and on attitudes of local people towards migrants in transit zones. Giles Reckinger's *Lampedusa* (2013) – an ethnographic study of the inhabitants of this tiny island in the Mediterranean that regularly becomes the unwanted destination for boat people – is an exception.[7] However, he does not operate with the concept of the transit zone and does not discuss any theory. Nevertheless, his findings show a number of parallels to mine; in particular, the islanders' perception of the state, which leads some of them to solidarize with the migrants, is striking.

2.2. Attitudes in heterogeneous areas

2.2.1. Contact and heterogeneity

How the presence of foreigners in an area influences attitudes and opinions towards them has long been the subject of debate among scholars. On the one hand, Allport's much-researched intergroup contact theory (1954) postulates that contact between members of different groups will lead to less prejudice and more positive attitudes between these groups. Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) conclude in a meta-analysis of 515 studies that intergroup contact leads to more positive attitudes under most circumstances, although there are negative factors (such as anxiety and threat) that may prevent this effect. On the other hand, studies on neighborhood diversity

[7] Reckinger (2013).

(Putnam 2007, Laitin 2011, Birte and Gundelach 2013) have shown that diversity in a community correlates negatively with social trust and the frequency and depth of contact between members of that community. While many authors have seen these two findings as contradictory, a few scholars (Stein et al 2000, Pettigrew et al 2010) have taken the debate further and studied the exact circumstances under which members of different groups come into contact in a local area, and these circumstances influence intergroup attitudes. Pettigrew et al (2010), based on a study on contact, threat, and prejudice towards foreigners in Germany, come up with a convincing model of how the percentage of outgroup members relates to ingroup prejudice levels against this outgroup:

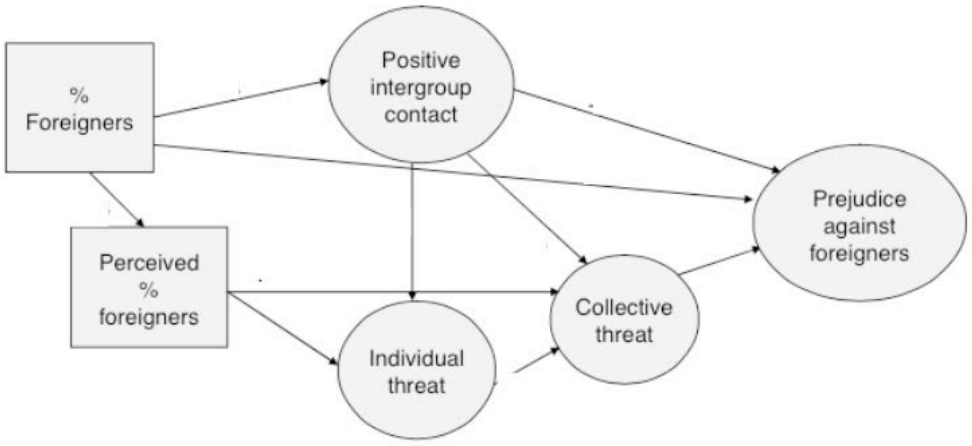


Figure 1. Diagram: Contact and threat as mediating factors in determining attitudes towards migrants[8]

The number of foreigners (outgroup members) in an area has two opposing effects on locals' (ingroup members') attitudes towards them. On the one hand, a higher percentage of foreigners leads to more positive intergroup encounters, which correlates negatively with prejudice levels. On the other hand, a higher percentage of foreigners also leads to a higher *perceived* percentage of foreigners – and this is positively correlated with an individual and collective feeling of threat,

[8] Pettigrew et al (2010), p. 645.

which is in turn correlated positively with higher prejudice. The fact that the *perceived* percentage of foreigners is positively correlated with feelings of threat is crucial here: concluding from this, people feel the most threatened if they believe that there are many foreigners in the area, but do not have any personal contact with them.

As we can see from Figure 1, positive intergroup contact on the one hand, and feelings of collective and individual threat on the other hand, are the most important mediating factors in determining levels of prejudice in a setting where outgroup members are present; threat and anxiety are positively correlated with prejudice, while intergroup contact is important in reducing feelings of threat and is thus negatively correlated with prejudice. Pettigrew et al (2010) conclude that "intergroup prejudice can be effectively combated with social policies that ease intergroup threat and enhance intergroup contact."[9]

2.2.2. Contact and threat in the migration context

What circumstances encourage or discourage contact?

In order for contact between locals and migrants to come about, migrants need to be present, and there need to be opportunities for positive, non-threatening interactions in everyday life – in workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods (Pettigrew et al 2010, Stein et al 2000). Moreover, migrants and locals should live in an atmosphere of mutual trust; as discussed below, feelings of anxiety and intergroup threat are the main hindering factor for positive intergroup contact.

Children, and generally second generation immigrants, seem to be a uniting factor between locals and foreigners; having children also brings parents together and gives them something in common, and second generation immigrants themselves feel much more at home in a new country, linguistically and otherwise (Wimmer 2004, own research 2014). For first-generation

[9] Pettigrew et al (2010), p. 648.

immigrants, on the other hand, language seems to be a major dividing factor, making it hard for them to approach locals and build contact with them.[10]

What circumstances encourage feelings of threat?

As we have seen, the main hindrance to intergroup contact is feelings of intergroup threat and anxiety (Voci and Hewstone 2003, Green 2007, Pettigrew et al 2010). According to Pettigrew et al 2010, feelings of threat occur when there are high levels of segregation and therefore little opportunity for direct contact. Inhabitants of heterogeneous areas become trapped in a vicious circle, where missing contact in the presence of an outgroup increases the perception that the outgroup is threatening (as shown in figure 1) and this feeling of threat in turn makes for less and lower quality contact (Wagner et al 2010, Stein et al 2000). This is confirmed by Pettigrew et al's findings that people who live in areas with a high density of foreigners, but don't have contact with them, have the most negative attitudes of all respondents, while those who live in such an area but have intense contact with foreigners are the most tolerant of all.[11] Further threat triggering factors are support for anti-minority prejudice from political leaders, as well as intergroup tensions occurring when there is a severe external threat (such as a terrorist attack) or local intergroup conflicts, a rapid increase in the size of a minority, when unemployment rises, and when there are indices of growing segregation (Pettigrew et al 2010). Semyonov et al (2004) found that an increase in the *perceived* number of minority members triggers feelings of threat.[12] Perceived large cultural differences between immigrants and locals are also correlated with less contact between the two groups (Wagner et al 2010, Laitin 2007).

How does the legal status of the migrants influence attitudes towards them?

[10] According to interviews with neighbourhood center leaders in Basel, Switzerland (own research, 2014).
[11] Pettigrew et al (2010), p. 640.
[12] Cited in Pettigrew et al (2010), p. 640.

The legal status – or perceived legal status – of migrants can have a large impact on how they are viewed. Depending on how migrants are designated and defined, natives will have different attitudes towards them, as Blinder (2014) writes:

> Asking people about their views on immigration raises a host of issues. For one, definitions and categories are a particular problem – with confusion likely among both individual respondents and survey organizations. Many important issues depend greatly on definitions of who is a migrant.[13]

Quantitative studies on migration attitudes show that certain kinds of migration figure more prominently in public awareness, and also raise more concerns, than others. In the European Union and in the US, respondents felt most negative about asylum seekers, while also overestimating the number of asylum seekers in their country;[14] this confirms the findings that natives tend to feel threatened when they *perceive* a minority to be large.[15]

A consistent finding in different studies (German Marshall Fund 2014, Blinder 2014, Migration Observatory 2011, Pettigrew et al 2010, Stein et al 2000, Hood and Morris 1998) is that respondents worry more about illegal than about legal migration and are more likely to be opposed to illegal immigrants. However, this preference is difficult to interpret in itself: for example, in the Marshall Fund's *Transatlantic Trends* study, 60% of American respondents said they were "worried about illegal immigrants", while 45% of respondents supported measures that would allow illegal immigrants to obtain legal status.[16] Some respondents therefore seem to be opposed to the laws and policies that forces immigrants into illegal status, rather than to the immigrants themselves.

In summary, the degree and quality of contact, the perceived number of migrants, and the legal status of these migrants all influence the way locals perceive them and interact with them. In particular, feelings of threat lead to a more negative perception and less contact with migrants.

[13] Blinder (2014), p. 2.
[14] Migration Observatory (2011), German Marshall Fund (2014).
[15] Seymonov (2004), Pettigrew et al (2010).
[16] German Marshall Fund (2014), p. 13.

However, all of the studies discussed in this section are based on the assumption that the two groups (migrants/foreigners and locals/natives) are either static or the number of migrants is increasing; they do not consider situations where one group is mobile, meaning that members of the group arrive at place with the intention of staying for a limited time before moving on; in short, they do not consider the case of transit migrants.

2.3. Local perceptions of the transit zone and the migrants within it

2.3.1. Research gap

Taken together, the findings from the first two subchapters, this leads to the conclusion that even though many scholars and policymakers have studied migrants in transit, few have paid attention to how local populations perceive transit zones and behave within them. And while there are many studies on attitudes of locals towards migrants, these studies assume a static set-up and do not take transit migrants into consideration.

My thesis works towards bridging this gap by studying the perceptions of the local population in one transit place, Bogovadja. The questions that lead my research and analysis are the following:

How do locals in Bogovadja perceive and interact with migrants who transit through Bogovadja? What factors influence these views and actions? In particular, how does the fact that they live in a transit place shape their views and attitudes towards migrants?

Because of the political connotations of the concepts of "transit migrant" and "transit country", I believe it is important to study further the attitudes of locals who live in these transit countries in places where transit migrants are present, how they perceive themselves as well as the migrants who come and stay there temporarily. My thesis contributes to this little researched field.

3. CONTEXT: SERBIA AND BOGOVADJA

The purpose of this chapter is to give an overview of the larger context of migration through Serbia. Migrants transiting through Serbia come into contact with different structures: one the one hand, there is official asylum system, which is supposed to provide anyone who applies for asylum with accommodation and access to an asylum procedure. On the other hand, there are smuggling networks, which facilitate the movement of migrants from the Southern to the Northern borders. These official and unofficial structures are explained in the first and second part of this chapter. Bogovadja has an important place in both of these structures, since it is home to the largest asylum center of the country, but also functions as a major transit hub where migrants and smugglers connect. The third part of the chapter zooms in on Bogovadja and gives a short overview over the history and characteristics of the village and the asylum center. Finally, there is a map of the area, in which the layout of the village, the asylum center, and other facilities in the area is shown.

3.1. Seeking asylum in Serbia

The asylum application process. The application process has several steps: In a first step, a migrant reports to a police station and expresses his intent to apply for asylum. The police issues him a simple certificate referring him to one of five asylum centers (Bogovadja, Banja Koviljača, Krnjača, Sjenica or Tutin) in the country, where he or she should report within 72 hours, and where he is entitled to food, shelter and medical care. The asylum centers are run by the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, a separate entity within the public administration that is also responsible for refugees and IDPs of the post-Yugoslav wars. In a second step, the migrant is registered and issued a photo ID by an officer of the Department for Asylum (located within the Department for Aliens of the Border Police of the Ministry of Interior), which functions as an

official ID card with which he may for example receive money from relatives through a transferring service such as Western Union,[17] and which theoretically allows him to move freely on the territory of Serbia. Within two weeks of the registration, the registered individual has to file an official application for asylum in the presence of an officer of the Department of asylum. After that, the asylum interview takes place, and a decision on the asylum claim is rendered within two months.[18]

Numbers and developments. The number of migrants who pass through the asylum system in Serbia has risen constantly since the state took over the mandate for the asylum process from UNHCR; while a mere 77 intents to apply for asylum were expressed in 2008, in the year 2013 there were over 5000 cases, in 2014 there were 16'500 cases, and nearly 5000 cases were recorded in the first two months of 2015 alone.[19] Statistics of the EU border protection agency Frontex show a similar increase in irregular border crossings. According to Frontex, the so-called "Western Balkan route" has become the third most important route into the European Union at the end of 2014.[20] In 2014, by far the largest number of asylum claims registered were from Syria (9701 claims), followed by Afghanistan (3017), Eritrea (796) and Somalia (707).[21] However, expressing the intent to apply for asylum is only the first step of the procedure; the number of asylum claims that are actually registered by the Department of Asylum are between 10 and 20 times lower. The number of asylum interviews conducted is lower still, and the number of actual decisions on granting asylum is minimal. To give an example, in the first ten months of 2013, 3844 individuals expressed the intention to apply for asylum, however, only 132 claims where

[17] W2EU information file on Serbia: http://w2eu.info/serbia.en/articles/serbia-asylum.en.html (19.04.15).
[18] Entire Paragraph: Asylum Protection Center (2013), p. 16f.
[19] UNHCR Statistics, *Asylum Seekers in Serbia in 2015*, http://www.unhcr.rs/en/resources/statistics/asylum.html (19.04.15).
[20] Frontex*: Western Balkan Route*, http://frontex.europa.eu/trends-and-routes/western-balkan-route/ (19.04.15). See also report of Human Rights Watch (2015).
[21] UNHCR Statistics, *Asylum Seekers in Serbia in 2014,* http://www.unhcr.rs/en/resources/statistics/asylum.html (19.04.15). See also Asylum Protection Center (2013), p. 8, for a discussion of these numbers.

actually submitted, 15 interviews were conducted, and only four decisions on granting asylum were made by the Department for Asylum – two positive, two negative.[22]

Problems and criticism. There are two interconnected reasons why the difference in numbers between expressed intent and filed asylum claims is so large. The first reason is that the asylum process in Serbia is slow and inefficient. The registration and the filing of the asylum claim have to be made in the presence of an officer from the Department of Asylum. However, these officers only visit the asylum centers sporadically; according to a report of the NGO "Asylum Protection Center" (APC) at the end of 2013, the Department visited the Bogovadja asylum center less than once a month, and when they visited they did not register everyone present.[23] This had not changed much by late 2014, according to APC and UNHCR.[24] Since migrants have to hand over the certificate of intent to seek asylum when they enter the asylum center, this means that most migrants *de facto* do not have any identity documents during their stay in the asylum center.[25]

The second reason is that an absolute majority of migrants who expressed the intent to apply for asylum leave Serbia without waiting for the official registration and interview process to begin.[26] In fact, the APC estimates that around six to seven times more migrants (than are registered) pass through the country each year unnoticed, without appearing in any statistics.[27] This means that the state has an obvious interest in keeping the asylum process slow: if they wait long enough, migrants will simply disappear.[28] For migrants on the other hand, seeking asylum is a way to legalize their status; this way, they cannot be deported, and they receive food, shelter and medical care. On their way from Turkey, usually over Greece and Macedonia to Hungary, Serbia – and for many, Bogovadja – is something like a "resting place", from where they organize the last leg

[22] Asylum Protection Center (2013), p. 16-21.
[23] Asylum Protection Center (2013, p. 17.
[24] Interview, Asylum Protection Center and UNHCR, Nov. 2014.
[25] Interview, No Borders Serbia, March 2015.
[26] According to Asylum Protection Center (2013), p. 7, as well as expert interviews with UNHCR and Asylum Protection Center, Nov. 2014.
[27] Asylum Protection Center (2013), p. 8.
[28] Interview, UNHCR, Nov. 2014.

of their journey into the European Union.[29] Since Serbia is not part of the common European Asylum system, seeking asylum in Serbia has no consequences for an asylum request filed in the EU.

However, there is evidence that many migrants are not even able to complete this first step towards legal stay in Serbia, despite trying. In a recently published report (April 2015), Human Rights Watch (HRW) found that migrants who file asylum requests with the police in the South of Serbia are often subjected to unofficial pushbacks to Macedonia and Bulgaria; at the main police station in Belgrade, migrants are often simply turned away, but sometimes also arrested and subjected to violence and abuse when trying to express their intent to seek asylum. Many migrants report that they were able to file their request only after multiple attempts. In Bogovadja, migrants sometimes have to sleep outside in the cold for days before being issued a certificate; according to official information that the police told HRW in early 2015, the officer in Bogovadja only register 15 people a day. Asking for bribes in order to issue the certificate is also common.[30] While in Serbia, I heard similar stories from migrants, activists and professionals working with migrants. "Sometimes the police doesn't give them papers – I don't understand why. It's a strange game that the state plays with them", as one professional said. Without the official confirmation from the police, migrants cannot get accommodation in any official asylum center, and neither are they able to legally stay in a hotel[31] or with private people.[32] Thus, those whom the police does not register are forced to stay outside.

[29] As formulated by Ljubimka Mitrovic from UNHCR (Nov. 2014).
[30] Human Rights Watch (2015).
[31] Although it does happen in practice, as my experiences and observations in the hotel in Lajkovac confirm.
[32] Interview with No Borders Serbia, 2015.

3.2. Travel and stay between legality and illegality

It is clearly not the focus of this thesis to detail the exact routes and ways on which migrants travel. In fact, I avoided asking too specific questions in this direction during fieldwork because I did not want to give the impression of "snooping around". Rather, this section is based on informal interviews with migrants, taxi drivers, and others involved, and sketches out how this "transport system" functions in Serbia; this is important in order to understand why migrants come to Bogovadja (and why the taxi drivers from the next two larger towns spend so much time in the Bogovadja village pub).

The "Western Balkan route" leads from Turkey over Greece to either Macedonia, or to Albania and Montenegro, and from there to Serbia (sometimes through Kosovo). From Serbia, most migrants travel on towards Hungary, while a small percentage heads for Croatia.[33] On the information site of Frontex about the Western Balkan route, there is a reference to an "*open taxi* system" that migrants use.[34] Frontex does not provide any further explanation on how this system works; however, it does seem that most transport services to migrants in Serbia are provided by (registered or unregistered) "taxi drivers". This is so established that the word "taxi driver" has a particular connotation in Bogovadja, referring to anyone who is involved in some kind of murky business with the migrants (this will be further discussed in Chapters 5 and 6).

Those who cannot afford taxi services or do not wish to rely on them for other reasons often opt for traveling by foot. I spoke with several migrants who came by foot from as far as Macedonia or Greece, and who were planning on continuing this way into Hungary. However, even those who rely on taxis usually walk at least part of the way, across the borders, as taxi drivers don't risk driving this part of the stretch.

[33] Asylum Protection Center (2013), p. 12-16.
[34] Frontex*: Western Balkan Route*, http://frontex.europa.eu/trends-and-routes/western-balkan-route/ (19.04.15).

Even within the borders of Serbia it is illegal to transport people who don't have documents. A member of a film crew, who was shooting a documentary in Bogovadja in 2014, recounted an incident during which he and his colleagues drove several migrants from Bogovadja to the Belgrade police station (so that they could register as asylum seekers); upon arrival, the crew was nearly arrested for human smuggling.[35] These laws also apply to taxis, and one taxi driver in the nearby town of Lazarevac (who works for a "legally registered taxi company", as he emphasized) told me that he is not allowed to take any migrants, and that he judges by the skin color whether someone is a migrant or not. He also told me that many "illegal" taxi drivers in Bogovadja were arrested and fined and their taxis were confiscated, a story that was later confirmed by other taxi drivers as well.[36] Similar incidents also take place in Subotica, near the Hungarian border.[37]

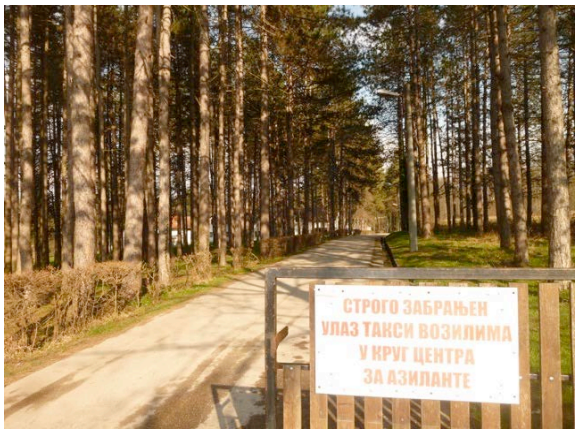
Despite this, Bogovadja has plenty of taxi drivers whose main business is to drive migrants from the asylum center to the village and nearby towns, but many also take them further if they pay. Many locals as well as migrants suspect that taxi drivers and police work together, and that the police also profits from this business.[38] In the surroundings of Bogovadja, it isn't so clear which migrants are "legal" and which ones aren't: some of those who live in the asylum center have documents, but since new migrants arrive daily and the waiting times for registration are sometimes long, there are also people without documents there. This makes it difficult to draw a line between "legal" and "illegal" migrants in practice, and the local's ideas of (il)legality is accordingly blurred (this will be discussed in detail in the analysis of the fieldwork). In the context of the taxi business, it can be said that there is a grey zone between legality and illegality both for taxi drivers and migrants, and that both are generally "less legal" near the border than

[35] In fact, the only reason they were *not* arrested according to the interviewee was that the filmmaker is well-known and one of the police officers recognized him and let them go. Interview, March 2015.
[36] Informal interviews in Bogovadja, March 2015.
[37] Informal interview in Subotica, January 2015.
[38] Informal interviews, March 2015; see also statements by migrants in the Human Rights Watch (2015) report on experiences with smugglers and police cooperating near Subotica.

within the country, and "more legal" if they are nearer to an official asylum center. Police control and confiscation of taxis seems to be harsher near Subotica, and the growing illegality of migrants as they approach the border also makes them more vulnerable to police abuse: while HRW found cases of police abuse throughout the country, it seems to be most widespread near the Macedonian border (with unofficial pushbacks) as well as near the Hungarian border, where many cases of police violence were reported.[39]

Within this transport system of taxi drivers and migrants, Bogovadja functions as a transit hub. Even though there are now five asylum centers in Serbia, the one in Bogovadja was the first of its kind and many migrants, both those who travel on foot and those who come by taxi, head straight to Bogovadja rather than to another place in Serbia. Some who are referred to another center still prefer staying around Bogovadja in the forest; in early 2014, two Eritrean migrants were hospitalized with frostbite in the Valjevo hospital after having walked over 200 kilometers from the Tutin asylum center (in the South) to Bogovadja.[40] Several professionals I spoke with said that migrants come to Bogovadja because of its reputation – they hear from others that this is the place to go – and because of the connections they find there in order to travel onwards.[41]

[39] Human Rights Watch (2015); the treatment of migrants near Subotica is also documented by Noborder Serbia, https://noborderserbia.wordpress.com/2014/12/29/alarmantna-situacija-i-policijska-represija-u-subotici/ (20.04.15).
[40] Valjevo: Azilanti u bolnici zbog pomrzlina. *Večernije Novosti,* 28.01.2014.
[41] Interviews with experts and professionals, November and March 2015.

Left: Beds and a tent set up in a picnic shelter near the asylum center in Bogovadja; four migrants were sleeping there when I visited, because they had not been able to register with the police. Right: Entrance to the asylum center. The sign reads "Entry of taxis into asylum center grounds is strictly forbidden". Photos: NR, March 2015.

3.3. Bogovadja and its asylum center

Bogovadja. Bogovadja is a village in the municipality of Lajkovac, situated in the Kolubara district about 70 kilometers southwest of Belgrade. The next larger towns are Lajkovac (6 kilometers from Bogovadja, 8000 inhabitants), and Lazarevac (10 kilometers from Bogovadja, 25'000 inhabitants).

The village of Bogovadja has around 470 inhabitants.[42] Most of them work either as farmers or in the opencast "Kolubara" mines near Ub (ca. 25 km from Bogovadja). Bogovadja is well known for its monastery; built in 1545, it is still a functioning monastery with five nuns today. Right next to it, there is a primary school, which is also attended by students from nearby villages such as Vračević and Nanomir. The school has eight grades and approximately 70 students aged 6-14.[43] Nearby, there is the largest army base of the country, a settlement of weekend cottages, and a rest home of the Serbian Red Cross in which the asylum center is located since 2011. From the school and the monastery, it is a two-kilometer trip along a road lined with scattered houses,

[42] Census of 2011, http://popis2011.stat.rs (20.04.15).
[43] According to interviews with locals, March 2015; numbers are approximate. For a better idea of the location, please consult the maps in Chapter 3.4.

farms and gardens, to the village center with a denser concentration of houses as well as a post office, a shop and a pub.

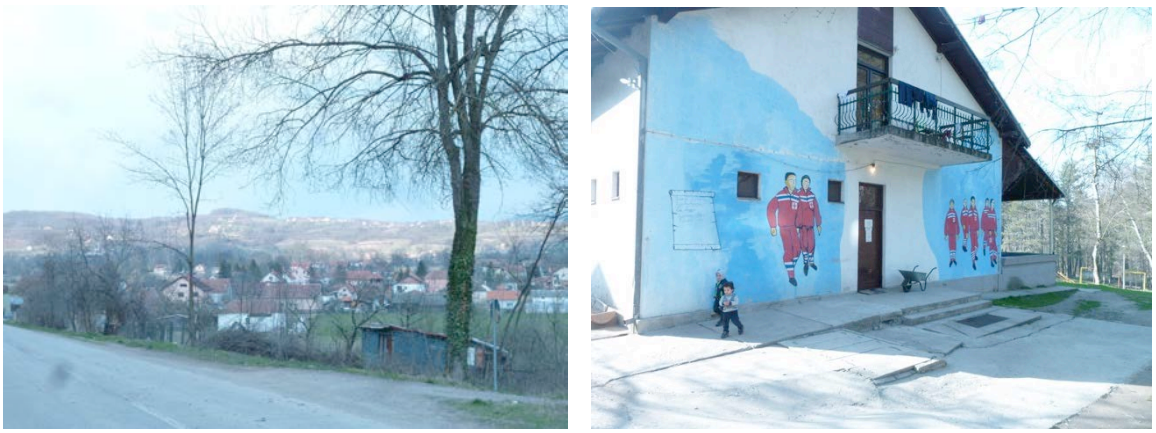
The asylum center in the rest home of the Red Cross. The facility which houses the asylum center belongs to the Serbian Red Cross and was originally built in 1928 to serve as a rest home where children from the city could go on vacation. For the larger part of its existence, it served this purpose, hosting youth camps, sportsmen, and Red Cross volunteers. Between 1992 and 2003, the center served as housing for displaced persons and refugees from Bosnia and Croatia, many of whom stayed in Bogovadja or elsewhere in the area after 2003. Between 2003 and 2011 the facility was again used mainly for children's camps. Because of the different sports facilities and a swimming pool that was put up in summer, many local children (from Bogovadja and other nearby villages) also spent their free time there, especially during summer vacation.[44]

In 2011, the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (thereafter referred to simply as *Commissariat*) rented the facility from the Red Cross and converted it into a reception center for asylum seekers. The infrastructure stayed the same and the people working in the kitchen, laundry and cleaning are still employed by the Red Cross. There are also several social workers and animators who are employed by UNHCR as well as various NGOs, while the director of the asylum center, Stojan Sjekloća, is employed by the Commissariat.

The asylum center in Bogovadja was the first of its kind in Serbia. Before it was opened, asylum seekers had been accommodated in Banja Koviljača, in a center that to this day also houses refugees and IDPs from the Yugoslav wars. The center in Bogovadja was the first, and until late 2013 the only center in Serbia to house exclusively asylum seekers from outside the Ex-Yugoslav space. With more and more migrants arriving in Bogovadja, and the asylum center being chronically full, the Commissariat opened four other asylum centers in December 2013 in

[44] Interviews, March 2015. See also the website of the facility, www.bogovadja.rs (01.05.2015).

Krnjača, Obrenovac, Sjenica and Tutin. However, Bogovadja remains high in traffic and still seems to be the "favorite" asylum center of migrants travelling through Serbia. Migrants who come there stay for an average of 20 days, though this varies hugely depending on the individuals.[45]



Left: Bogovadja, the main road between the asylum center and the village. Right: The asylum center in the Red Cross rest home. Photos: NR, March 2015.

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[45] Interviews with Asylum Protection Center and UNHCR (Nov. 2014), as well as with professionals (March 2015)

3.4. Map of Bogovadja and its surroundings

Figure 2. Map of Bogovadja and its surroundings (Source: Google Maps 2015).

4. METHODOLOGY

This thesis takes an ethnographic approach towards the local population in Bogovadja by combining in-depth interviews with different actors in the field with observation and more informal conversations. In this chapter, I outline the approach I took while conducting fieldwork and as well as the methods I used to analyze the gathered data.

My field research for this thesis in effect started in November 2014, when I accompanied a friend to Serbia for his own research on migration at the eastern EU borders. On that occasion, we conducted three expert interviews in Belgrade, with representatives of UNHCR, the Serbian Red Cross, and the NGO "Asylum Protection Center" (APC) respectively. We also ventured on a short trip to Bogovadja – we took a taxi to the asylum center and walked the two kilometers from there to the village, where we spent an hour chatting with locals about the migrants and about a protest that had taken place two days earlier. Bogovadja is very small – at first sight, little more than a few houses along a road. The center of the village consists of a small shop, a pub next door, and across the road a post office, a bus stop and a parking lot with a surprising amount of taxis.

Despite its sleepiness, Bogovadja struck me as a place worth researching in more depth. The migrant's presence was apparent everywhere – we met as many migrants as locals while we were there, and all of the locals we spoke to had something to say about them. There were also other "symptoms" of the migrant's presence – the most obvious being the taxi drivers, as well as signs posted in English, French and Arabic with a warning not to throw trash on the ground.

Being interested in interaction between different groups and in the implications of threat and contact, Bogovadja seemed like ideal terrain to research these phenomena on a small scale. So I set out for Bogovadja again in early March 2015 for a longer period of in-depth fieldwork. Since

I was not able to find accommodation in the village, I rented a room[46] in the nearby town of Lajkovac, to which Bogovadja administratively belongs. This turned out to be a practical solution, since my first interviewees – representatives of the cultural center and school, social and health professionals – work in Lajkovac and were then able to connect me to locals living and working in Bogovadja. From Lajkovac, I travelled to Bogovadja almost every day; either I got a ride with people I met, or I took a taxi.

4.1. Field research

4.1.1. Interviews and observation

In a period of 10 days, I conducted a total of 21 formal semi-structured interviews with different actors in and around Bogovadja (see table below). Sometimes I spoke with one person, while other interviews took place in a group setting with anything between two and twelve participants. I always had a set of keywords and questions with me that I would ask anyone who was willing to talk, so in addition to the formal interviews, I have detailed notes of approximately 20 informal conversations with different actors in and around Bogovadja. I also have detailed field notes from participant observation in the village center, as well as in the school, in the village shop, in the two pubs, and in the asylum center itself. The formal interviews were lasted between 20 and 90 minutes, with most of them being in the range of 40 minutes to an hour. The large majority of the formal interviews were recorded and later transcribed, with a few exceptions where I rely on detailed notes. The interviews were conducted in Serbian, with the exception of the November 2014 expert interviews (English) and interviews with migrants (English and French). All translations are my own.

[46] My stay in the hotel in Lajkovac was an interesting experience in itself, since most of the other guests were also migrants – those that I spoke to were from Irak and from Syria – on their way to Europe. One of them told me that he had tried to get accomodation in the Bogovadja asylum center, but that there had been a problem with the police there.

The two tables below show an overview of all the formal and informal interviews that I conducted; actors are listed in order of importance for my discussion and analysis.

Designation	**Who belongs to this group?**	**Number of formal interviews**	**Number of informal interviews**
Locals	People who live or work in Bogovadja, but did not come to Bogovadja because of the migrants	5 (total of 21 participants)	Ca. 15 (including 2 conversations with local taxi drivers)
Taxi drivers, shop owner (some are also locals)	Self-employed, their work depends directly on migrants' presence	None	6 (3 of them live in Bogovadja)
Professionals (none of them is local)	Government and NGO employees working directly with migrants in Bogovadja	5 (one participant each)	None
Migrants	Anyone who comes to Bogovadja from another country with the intention of staying in the asylum center and/or finding a connection to travel onwards	1 (one participant)	6 (with ca. 12 participants in total)

Figure 3. Table of interviews: actors who live, work or transit through Bogovadja.

Designation	**Who belongs to this group?**	**Number of formal interviews**	**Number of informal interviews**
Experts (all of them based in Belgrade)	Representatives of the following organizations: - Commissariat for Refugees and Migration - UNHCR Serbia - Red Cross Serbia - Asylum Protection Center (NGO) - No Borders Serbia	4	1
Project actors	People who were involved in one-time projects with migrants in Bogovadja: school projects, cultural exchange, making a documentary.	5 (4 based in Lajkovac, one in Belgrade)	2 (based in Lajkovac)
Lajkovac locals	People living in Lajkovac with no direct connection to Bogovadja or the migrants	2 (total of 3 participants)	ca. 5

Figure 4. Table of interviews: other actors.

The first table includes all actors who live and/or work in Bogovadja or who come there as migrants. These interviews are directly relevant to my analysis; the interviews' with locals are the most important part, but I also take into consideration what professionals, since discourses in the village are shaped by all of these actors. The second table gives an overview of further interviews I conducted (including the expert interviews from November 2014); these interviews are not

directly relevant to my research, but serve as a basis of additional information, and also help me interpret how discourses in Bogovadja are transmitted beyond the village.

4.1.2. Sample bias and data reliability

As outlined above, I started my research in Lajkovac by contacting the head of the local cultural center, whom I knew to be involved in several projects with migrants from the asylum center. She connected me to the representatives of the school, health and social care facilities who are also responsible for Bogovadja; I spent the first two days interviewing these people, and in the meantime made several chance encounters with people who either worked in Bogovadja or had friends there; especially the acquaintance of two teachers who work in the Bogovadja primary school was extremely helpful. They invited me to visit their classes and talk to their students, pointed me to further people I could talk to, and also willingly answered my questions themselves. I found all of my formal interview partners using this snowballing system, and none of them refrained from participating. Having this initial support of the cultural center and the local school were also helpful in gaining the trust of locals whom I spontaneously started to chat with in the village, since it gave me the backing of institutions that they know and trust. I usually told people that I am a Swiss student based in Hungary and that I came to Bogovadja to find out how locals and migrants got along. With the exception of one old man who told me to "leave the village and don't come back", everyone I spoke to spontaneously was exceptionally friendly and willingly spent a few minutes chatting and telling me about their experiences.

In spite of this, there is a certain both in my sample and in my data: for one, I did not conduct any formal interviews with taxi drivers, with the owner of the shop or with the owner of either of the pubs in Bogovadja. Even do I did chat with the taxi drivers who took me to and from Bogovadja, and with a few more in the village, I did not ask them for a formal interview – mainly because I was (perhaps overly) concerned that they might get the impression that I am trying to uncover

their sometimes not-so-legal actions and that I might find myself in an unpleasant or even dangerous situation because of this. As a consequence, their perspective is less represented in my analysis. Unfortunately, I also was not able to interview any of the locals who work for the Red Cross in the asylum center, so their perspective is missing from my analysis.

Also, I conducted only one formal interview with a migrant, who lived in Bogovadja for several months in 2013, but does not live there anymore. In Bogovadja, I conducted several informal interviews with migrants whom I met there. These interviews were crucial in helping me grasp both the importance of Bogovadja to these migrants' journeys, and certain processes within the village. However, their perspectives are not the main focus of this thesis, and because I focus on the locals' point of view, there is a tendency to generalize and speak about "the migrants", which could not be wholly avoided.

Concerning the reliability of what people told me, I generally felt that locals were being open and honest with me during the interviews, although the fact that I come from a "western country" may have lead some people to emphasize certain aspects more than they would have towards a fellow Serb; in particular, almost everyone I met was quick to assure me that they are "not racists". However, in general I think that being a researcher not just from outside the village but from outside Serbia was helpful in this context, since my interviewees usually didn't assume that I had any pre-existing knowledge on what was going on, and gladly explained me the whole situation in Bogovadja from their point of view. Being fluent in Serbian as a non-mother-tongue speaker was also a double bonus: It made people feel sympathetic towards me, while also giving me the chance to ask interviewees to specify and explain their understanding of certain words or concepts, under the pretext of "linguistically" not having understood (or of course when I really didn't understand what they meant).

4.2. Analysis

In a first step, I categorized my interviewees into locals, professionals, migrants and taxi drivers has two main purposes: Firstly, it helped me to tease apart and analyze the positions and interests of the different actors in Bogovadja, and to identify and interpret differing discourses regarding migrants and migration. Secondly, it protects the anonymity of my interview partners while still allowing me to make meaningful statements about what they said. Bogovadja is a small village, and it would be easy to guess who said what if I revealed more detailed information about the people I spoke with. For reasons of readability, I assigned pseudonyms to my interviewees; beyond that, I generally identify them simply as members of these categories. It is important to keep in mind that the locals themselves refer to some of these actors differently, and also categorize them differently, than I do; an overview of the designations that locals use is given in Chapter 5.1.

My main interest is the perspectives of the inhabitants of Bogovadja (locals), while the interviews with other actors – migrants, taxi drivers, and government and NGO employees – serve as a basis for additional information. However, I consider everyone living, working, or temporarily staying in Bogovadja as somewhat of an expert regarding migrants, so each interview fulfills both purposes: providing information *and* representing a certain viewpoint and discourse. Accordingly, I analyzed the interviews in two steps: I started out by going through the interviews with locals, identifying the most important *topics* that came up, and summarizing what different people had said on these. I then looked at what other actors had to say about these topics, and whether they spoke about other themes that had not been brought up by locals. The results of this first step are summarized in Chapter 5. In a second step, I looked more closely at the locals' *discourses* about the situation in Bogovadja and about the migrants; I paid particular attention to emphasis and categorized the locals according to what they emphasized most during the interview; I also paid

close attention to designations and categorizations of other actors, and to how locals connected these different actors with each other. My own observations in and around Bogovadja served to verify and explain local attitudes at every stage of the analysis. All of this is discussed in Chapter 6, in which I also summarize the findings and integrate them into the theoretical framework of perceptions on migrants within the transit zone.

5. PRESENTATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present the situation in Bogovadja as it is today, and as it was since 2011, as presented to me by locals. After shortly revising the different actors within the village, I present a detailed introduction to Bogovadja, introducing important places and events as well as interactions that take place at these places and events. In a second part, I categorize the interactions and experiences of locals and present them as three "aspects" of the migrants' presence: negative aspects, positive aspects, and business aspects.

This chapter is based on my own observations as well as on interviews with locals and other actors. Here, I treat my interviewees as informants, who provide me with the necessary information to depict and understand the different interactions in the village; in the following, analytical chapter, I treat them as representatives of a certain point of view, and discuss and analyze the different discourses accordingly.

5.1. The different actors in Bogovadja as seen by locals

In the previous chapter I introduced the different categories of actors that I apply in my analysis of the interviews. As already mentioned there, locals use different designations, and sometimes also different categories, when talking about these same actors. To avoid confusion, I created a table where my own labels are contrasted with those of locals. These labels also come up in my text when directly referring to the statements and views of locals:

My designation	Who belongs to this group from my point of view	Local designation(s)
Locals	People who live or work in Bogovadja, but did not come to Bogovadja because of the migrants	"We"; "Locals"; "People from Bogovadja"
Taxi drivers, shop owner, pub owners	Self-employed, their work depends directly on migrants' presence	"Taxi drivers"; "those who profit"

Professionals	Government and NGO employees working directly with migrants in Bogovadja	"The State"; "the Commissariat"; "the Red Cross"
Migrants	Anyone who comes to Bogovadja from another country with the intention of staying in the asylum center and/or finding a connection to travel onwards	"Asylum seekers"; "black people"; "illegal migrants"; "they"

Figure 5. Table of different actors in Bogovadja as labeled by myself and by locals.

5.2. Welcome to Bogovadja

"No, no. We will drive you to Bogovadja tomorrow. Otherwise you will have to take a taxi, and they'll rip you off for sure", my new acquaintance in Lajkovac tells me. On the way to Bogovadja the next morning, he calls a friend who lives there and asks him if he has time to meet us: "we have this student from Switzerland here, can you talk to her? Otherwise she will have to go chasing people in the village." After we pick up the friend, we head straight out of the village again and go for coffee and *rakija* in a pub about two kilometers down the road to Lajkovac.

Even before I conduct my first formal interview in Bogovadja, this episode teaches me three things: that taxi drivers are not to be trusted, that hanging around in the center of Bogovadja is not deemed an appropriate activity for visitors, and that locals don't go for drinks in the Bogovadja village pub.

In the village. Admittedly, the center of Bogovadja is not the most inviting place to spend time. Besides a small metal bus shelter, there are no benches or places to sit, no trees nor playground. A post office and a few houses with dirty or broken windows and the abandoned station of the now defunct narrow-gauge railway stand at the edge of a free space, indicating that this may have been a livelier square once; now it serves mostly as a parking lot for taxis. Across the road, there is a small shop and a pub next door. Whenever I go there, there are always a few people – mostly migrants and taxi drivers – standing outside, smoking and chatting. Taxis stop in front of the shop

and migrants get in or out; others arrive by foot from the asylum center, shop for groceries or go to the pub to drinking a tea or smoke a *shisha*.

Both the pub and the shop are frequented almost exclusively by migrants. "Without them, I would have had to close down long ago", the owner of the shop tells me during our first visit in November. He is concerned about the onset of winter:

> They buy candles here, because they sleep in the forest or in abandoned houses – now the weather is still warm, but imagine how it is in January.

On a cold and rainy afternoon in March, I pay a visit to the pub. It's very small and consists of a bar, a few plastic tables and chairs, and an corner with a few computers, which migrants use to access the Internet. The whole place is dark and rather dirty, and very different from the pub on the road to Lazarevac, where I conducted my first interview. Most of the customers are migrants; the only Serbian guests appear to be taxi drivers. They sit by the bar and chat with the barmaid, but they seem friendly with the migrants, and greet some of them with a nod or a handshake as they come in.

Left: Taxis parked in the center of Bogovadja. Right: Taxi drivers and migrants in front of the pub and the shop. Photos: NR, March 2015.

Along the main road. Between the village and the asylum center (with the school and the monastery nearby) lies a two-kilometer road stretch with scattered houses and gardens along the

way and the forest beyond. Schoolchildren from Bogovadja walk or are driven to school, and migrants take taxis or walk from the asylum center to the village along this road. This is one of the places where villagers and migrants meet, and people living along this main road are seen as something of an authority regarding the migrants: "She lives on the main road, so sometimes migrants sit on her fence looking for an open wi-fi network", or "you should visit me, I live on the main road so you will meet many migrants there".

Around the asylum center. Approaching the asylum center, there are fewer and fewer houses along the way and at some point the road turns upward into a forest stretch; a few minutes later, beyond the next bend, the church tower of the monastery comes into sight. Right by the road lies the old primary school, now dilapidated and with boarded up windows and doors; the new primary school is located in a narrow white building, hidden behind the trees a few steps from the monastery. Behind it there is only forest. On the other side of the main road, the main building of the asylum center shimmers through the trees. Around the grounds of the center, there is a small settlement consisting mostly of weekend cottages, and another 500 meters along the road lies another restaurant, the *Japanski Bor* (or "Hayatt", as migrants call it), larger than the village pub, whose customers are also only migrants and taxi drivers. All of these buildings are surrounded by dense forest, with a few fields further beyond.


Left: The Bogovadja primary school. The monastery can be seen in the background. Right: In the monastery. The green building in the background is part of the army base; on the hill above a few weekend cottages can be seen. The asylum center is located in the forest on the hill (left of the cottages). Photos: NR, March 2015.

Migrants in the "jungle".[47] In 2012 and 2013, before asylum centers in other parts of Serbia were opened, the asylum center in Bogovadja was often overcrowded, and sometimes several hundred migrants (estimations of locals range from 300 to 700) were forced to sleep outside. Locals told me that there were people sleeping everywhere, in the forest, by the school yard, outside the "Hayatt" pub, in huts and abandoned houses, as well as in the old school building until the windows were boarded up to keep them out. Break-ins into nearby weekend cottages were also common during this time, especially in the winter period; often, the migrants tore up the floorboards or used the furniture to light a fire for heating. Migrants also often got water from wells in private yards and sometimes washed themselves at drinking water fountains and wells.

In early 2013, the Commissariat opened another shelter in the neighboring village, Vračević. That temporary shelter was essentially just a private house owned by two brothers, who were paid by the Commissariat to accommodate around 50 migrants who applied for asylum. Allegedly, the sanitary conditions in that house were very bad, as it only had one bathroom and an outside toilet for all 50 inhabitants.

[47] "Jungle" is a term used by migrants all over Europe for unofficial camps and shelters.


Left: Migrants walking through the forest along the main road from the "Hayatt" to the asylum center. Right: An abandoned electrostation repurposed as a place to sleep. Photos: Marc Speer, October 2014.

Reactions. In November 2013, the local council in Bogovadja organized a protest against this situation: a demonstration on the street as well as a "school strike", where parents did not send their children to school for one week in protest of the fact that all of this was happening in immediate vicinity of the school. The protesters were quoted in the media that they were not protesting against the migrants, but against the bad conditions in which they were forced to live, and demanded that the Commissariat find an appropriate solution for them; though many felt that the appropriate solution would be to remove the asylum center altogether.[48] This sentiment was confirmed when I spoke to two of the main protest organizers in March 2015, who emphasized

> We were not protesting against them, but for them... Really, we organized the protest more because of them than because of us.

In Vračević, locals organized a road blockade to protest the temporary shelter there, and there was one instance when somebody threw stones at the house where the migrants were accommodated, and broke a window. Nobody was injured, and authorities did not further investigate of this instance; however, it was sometimes invoked by locals in Bogovadja, saying that "this never happened here".

[48] Meštani traže iseljenje azilanata iz Bogovađe. *Blic,* 02.11.2014

In late 2013, the Commissariat opened four more asylum centers in other parts of Serbia and transferred most of the migrants around Bogovadja there. However, because of the slow and badly functioning bureaucratic procedure of registering as an asylum seeker, new migrants arriving to Bogovadja still regularly sleep outside in the forest, at least for a few days. In November 2014, the local council organized another protest, demanding a "long-term solution" for this problem. However, the situation did not change because of this. As discussed in the following chapter, the experience of hundreds of migrants sleeping outside, in combination with the fact that a few migrants still sleep outside, is central for local people's perception of the situation in Bogovadja.

5.3. Migrants in Bogovadja: the good, the bad, and the business side of things

In this subchapter, I present three different aspects of the migrant's presence in Bogovadja as seen by locals. The different experiences and interactions that I recount are to a small part based on my own observations and to a large part on interviews with locals. My aim here is to streamline the different accounts in a descriptive, rather than analytical way (the analysis follows in Chapter 6). The categorization into positive, negative and business aspects is my own.

5.3.1. Negative aspects

When asked how they felt about the migrants, most of my interview partners started off by telling me that "there are no problems at all with the asylum seekers" or that "no one in the village has anything against them". Many then immediately went over to describing a number of problems and annoyances connected to the migrants presence; however, they generally do not hold the migrants responsible, but rather the state and other official actors, who are not "dealing with this the way they should", or the "rude and illegal" taxi drivers. These are the more problem-focused

people, who also organized and participated in the various protests and demand solutions to the problems they see.

The list of annoyances and problems is long, but a few main problems that were named by almost everyone I spoke to:

Littering. Many people told me that there is much more garbage in the village and in the water ditch along the side of the road since the opening of the asylum center; this was a very common complaint, and often the first thing that came up in short roadside conversations. Several cleanups were organized since the opening of the center – once, the director of the asylum centers sent a group of migrants to pick up trash, and another time young people from the village cleaned up the garbage and posted signs in four languages warning not to throw trash on the ground. However, the situation hasn't changed much because of this.

Left: Litter in the village center. Right: No-Littering-Sign in Arabic, Serbian, French and English, and pictograms instructing people to use trash cans (even though there are no trash cans anywhere); below that a message from the local council announcing a protest on November 2. Photos: NR, March 2015 / November 2014.

"Illegal" migrants. Many of my interviewees expressed the idea that some or all migrants who come to Bogovadja are "illegal". For most people, it is largely a practical distinction: "legal" migrants are those who stay in the asylum center, while "illegal" migrants are the ones who stay outside of the official center, in the forest or in weekend cottages in the area. When asked to

further specify what makes a migrant legal or illegal beyond that, ideas became much more blurred: several people said that "illegal migrants" are those who crossed the border illegally, or who don't have identity documents, and some locals seemed to believe that this was the reason why they were not admitted to the asylum center. Others had a clear idea that most of the migrants come without valid documents and cross at least some borders illegally, and that they are not admitted to the asylum center for other reasons, also connected to questionable practices of the police or other state actors; these locals did not evoke the legal/illegal distinction, but simply said that there are some migrants who stay outside of the asylum center. And for some interviewees being "illegal" simply meant that the migrant in question had not been properly checked or registered by the police or other authorities, without questioning whether this was something that the migrants could influence or not. Finally, it is important to note that locals generally refer to the migrants as "asylum seekers" *(azilanti)*, and that this has little to do with whether or not they applied for asylum in Serbia; rather, it refers to the assumed intention to apply for asylum in the European Union.

Break-ins and damages in weekend cottages. Many locals mentioned that there had been break-ins into weekend cottages around the asylum center; estimates ranged from "maybe 6 or 7" cases (according to a taxi driver), up to "more than 50" such occurrences (according to one of the protest organizers). There were a few emblematic stories that people told me: for example, that there had been instances when migrants tore up the floor boards and destroyed the furniture in order to make a fire, and other cases when they used the phone in the cottage to make overseas calls, resulting in very high phone bills for the owners. Interestingly, these stories seem to circulate well beyond Bogovadja, as they were recounted to me by almost everyone I spoke to in Lajkovac, and even a few people in Belgrade. One reason for this may be the wide media coverage of the massive amounts of migrants sleeping in the forest in 2013, as well as of the

protests against it. Another reason could be that the owners of the weekend cottages mostly live in Belgrade – and since the break-ins are the thing that disturbs them the most, they voice this concern the loudest. One woman whom I spoke with in November 2014, shortly after the protest, even said that the protests had been initiated by cottage owners from Belgrade; a taxi driver from Lazarevac, who took us to Bogovadja in November, went even further, suggesting that these "arrogant weekenders" had probably paid the villagers to participate in the protest. One of the professionals I spoke with had a similar point of view, adding that the villagers are easy to manipulate because most of them only have primary education. The role of the cottage owners in voicing and organizing protests would be an interesting thread to follow; unfortunately, I didn't have to chance to speak to any of them, and it is not the main focus of this thesis.

Surprisingly, almost none of the locals seemed worried about their physical safety or about break-ins into their own homes. Although a few people did mention that they are more careful about locking doors and gates, most did not seem particularly worried, and several people emphasized that there had not been any instances when a migrant attacked anyone or even stole anything more than some pears from a tree or, in one instance, a pair of sneakers from a porch.

Hygiene and health concerns. A far more serious issue for most locals are the unsanitary living conditions of the migrants living outside of the asylum center, and the worry that this may lead to water contamination and the spread of diseases in the village. Some people were also worried that they might catch Ebola or other "tropical diseases" from "African migrants"; the UNHCR public opinion survey from September 2014 confirms that locals in Bogovadja express far more worries about catching diseases than locals in Sjenica or Banja Koviljača (where there are also asylum centers). One professional suggested that this was also due to the manipulation of cottage owners; according to him, one of the speakers of the November 2013 protest had claimed that the migrants might have tropical illnesses, invoking an acquaintance in the Belgrade tropical institute.

While this speech may have left a lasting impression on some, there are also other reasons why so many locals worry about the spread of diseases: the unsanitary living conditions of those migrants who live outside. Several people told me that they have seen migrants in a very bad condition from having walked for days in the cold, and even migrants with open wounds. Many worry about ground water contamination, since Bogovadja does not have a central water supply; several interviewees told me that the migrants sometimes wash themselves at drinking water fountains and wells, or that they even sleep in the water ditch. The garbage in the water ditch contributes further to this fear – in the eyes of the locals, the litter is but the most visible symptom of a larger and more diffuse danger of pollution, water contamination and infectious diseases.

The experiences of locals in Vračević, where "fifty asylum seekers were put in a house that is suitable for five" also feeds into these fears; allegedly, the sanitary conditions there were very bad, with only one bathroom and one outside toilet for the whole facility.

Even though the situation has clearly improved since asylum centers opened in other parts of Serbia, the experiences from the time when there were 200-300 migrants in the forests around Bogovadja have left a lasting impression on the local population.

These experiences correspond to the finding of Pettigrew et al (2010) that a rapid growth in actual or perceived numbers of minority members leads to increased feelings of threat among the ingroup. In Bogovadja, this is especially important, since it still occurs regularly that migrants sleep outside, and nobody knows exactly how many migrants are staying in the forests at any given time.

All of this contributes further to the impression that authorities such as the police or the Commissariat either have no control over the situation, or are consciously keeping it this way for their own profit. The idea that those migrants who are outside of the center are somehow "illegal"

is a further source of concern, mainly because they have not been checked by the police nor, more importantly, examined by a doctor. All these things add up to a diffuse threat posed by the possibility that there may be dangerously ill or criminal people coming to or staying near the village at any given time.

5.3.2. Positive aspects

While most of my interviewees expressed these general fears and problems at some point of the conversation, only one person reported a personal negative experience with an migrant. Several people emphasized that there hadn't been any incidents of violence or conflict between migrants and locals. "We don't really have much to do with each other", as one man put it, "so there are no opportunities for conflict."

Concluding from my interviews, it is not entirely true that locals and migrants "don't have anything to do with each other": almost everyone I spoke to had had at least some personal contact with migrants to report. In some of the interviews, these personal experiences predominated: the interviewees started off by telling about some migrants they met, then at some point in the conversation admitted that there were also some problems with the migrants' presence, and then went back to relating personal stories and experiences. Interestingly, the interviewees who expressed these views were all older women who do not have a job outside of the village; they either live by the main road, or regularly walk from the village to the school or the monastery, and they seem to come into contact with migrants mostly along this main road. Those women were generally more focused on their interactions with individual migrants; their perception of the migrants was dominated by feelings of pity for the bad situation they are in.

When I asked my more "problem-focused" interview partners whether they had any personal contacts with migrants, many of told me that "they don't stay here for long". However, many of them also at least some personal acquaintance or contact – often offhandedly. Maybe they

thought that these encounters were not worth delving into, because they didn't develop into lasting friendships, or simply because they are not very exciting.

In what follows, I try to summarize the more positively connoted experiences that locals reported. Not all of these experiences are positive or "happy" as such – on the contrary, many locals expressed feeling terribly sorry for the migrants, and it is often these feelings of pity that lead them to reach out to the migrants in the first place. However, what all these experiences have in common is that they portray the migrants in a positive light, and serve to justify that "they are good people" or "this [the bad conditions] is not their fault".

Mutual help and hospitality. Marija, a middle-aged woman who works in the village, started off our conversation by relating a recent encounter:

> Not long ago, I had to walk home from the monastery with two bags, they were really heavy. So I was carrying all these things, and I met one [migrant], just as I came to the main road. I don't know English, so I couldn't communicate with him, but he gestured for me to give him the bags, and he carried them all the way to my house.

She then went on to emphasize the hardships of the migrants who come to Bogovadja, explaining how she feels sorry every time she sees groups of migrants, and especially when she sees families walking along the road to the asylum center. Two older ladies, whom I both (separately) chatted with over the garden fence, had a similar pattern of relating to the migrants, telling me how they feel sorry for them, and then emphasizing that they are "good people". One of them, Mirjana told me that some migrants helped her to shovel snow in the winter, while the other one, Zorica, delved into a long account of all the good things that migrants had done for her around the house and the garden, and told me that she is happy about that, because there are no other young people in the village who could help her:

> Our children also go abroad, just like them [the migrants] – there is no work here (...). Look, the village is empty, there are only old people left. (...) When they pass by my house, if I have trouble starting the lawn mower, they [the migrants] help me. (...) Once, my son-in-law came to visit and he said, why do you let them into your yard? I took him over there [to the garden shed] and showed him all the wood they cut for me – he couldn't believe his eyes!

Zorica and Mirjana, in return, give the migrants fruit from their gardens or invite them onto the porch for a coffee. Other people offer other forms of help: several people told me that they gave winter clothes and shoes to migrants, and one man who lives in the village center leaves his wi-fi network open so that the migrants who come to the shop and to the pub can use it.

Personal contacts and friendships. Such personal contacts were recounted not only by the old ladies, but also by other interviewees who were otherwise more "problem-focused". Several people re-told stories that migrants had told them, about why they left their home countries, how they travelled here, or where they wanted to go. Schoolchildren told me that they often play basketball or football with migrants from the asylum center.

In theory, the children of migrants who live in the asylum center have the right to attend school; in practice it doesn't happen often, since the administrative procedure for enrolling can take several weeks or even months, and most families don't stay in the center that long.[49] However, in 2013 two twin brothers from Somalia attended the school for several months. One teacher in the school told me that "the whole village knew them", and another one added:

> They knew English, which was great for our [local] children. And also some Serbian – when they learnt a new word, they first translated it into English and then into their language. So they practiced their English and also learnt Serbian. And for our children it was really an advantage, because for them the hardest part [of learning English] is speaking, it's much easier for them to write or learn the grammar.

These two boys and their family left a lasting impression. Even people living in Lajkovac had heard of them, probably because several news portals reported about them attending school. Also, they actually stayed in contact with several people from the village: the director of the school told me that the family wrote to them recently that they are in Sweden; and another employee of the school told me that the two boys sometimes talk on Skype with the children from the village.

[49] Interview with Asylum Protection Center (Nov. 2014) as well as with school principal and social worker in Lajkovac (March 2015).

Several people who spoke about this family mentioned that the parents of these two boys were doctors, thus highly educated people. The fact that some migrants are well educated also came up when locals talked about other personal contacts and friendships; this emphasis on education seems to be a kind of strategy to explain and prove that some of the migrants are worth associating with, and to differentiate them from the anonymous other migrants who pose the various threats discussed above.

Discouragement of contact, differing opinions. The above-mentioned son-in-law is not the only person who is skeptical about migrants spending too much time in local people's gardens. Both Mirjana and Zorica told me that the police, who come to the village occasionally, told them that it's not allowed to invite migrants in, and that they should not be sitting on local people's porches either. When I expressed my surprise at this and asked why, neither of them could give me any more specific reason; "that's just what they said", Mirjana told me. However, both of them said that there are different opinions in the village and that "there are people who hate them [the migrants]" and who do not want them in the village at all. All of my more "positively focused" interviewees mentioned that there are different opinions in the village – this aspect will be further discussed in chapter 6.

5.3.3. Business aspects

The "business" aspect of the migrants' presence is tricky to present, since doing business with the migrants is overwhelmingly perceived as either an illegal or at least an immoral activity in Bogovadja, and few people openly admitted to profiting from the migrants. I nevertheless decided to create a separate analytical category for them, since there clearly *is* a whole micro-economy that has developed around the migrants' presence in Bogovadja. This aspect cannot simply categorized as positive or negative, and actors who focus on this aspect have a pragmatic

approach: for them, the migrants present are a business opportunity first and foremost, and they profit from them in various ways.

The different economic activities can be placed on a scale between "very legal" and "very illegal". I start out here by describing the most "legal" ones, gradually moving towards the more "illegal" economic activities:

There are around 10 people from Bogovadja and a few other surrounding villages who are **employed in the asylum center**, either by the Red Cross or by a private security company. This is a form of economic activity that none of the locals disapproved of, and some even mentioned that this is "one of the good sides" of the asylum center, since it provides jobs.

The owners of the **village shop and of the two pubs** also make a living from the presence of the migrants – as the shop owner told me, without the migrants he wouldn't have any business. However, many locals complain that the prices in the shop are exorbitant, and accuse the owner of profiting from the migrants, whose only choice for shopping is to go to the village shop or take a taxi to the next town. The owners of the pubs are viewed similarly, while some locals also emphasized that the owner of the "Hayatt" (the pub next to the asylum center) is not from Bogovadja, but from Lazarevac. Some locals also implied that the owners of the shop and pub are involved in illegal activities, at least to the extent that they allow migrants and smugglers to form connections there.

Despite these negative perceptions, other locals have also at some point taken advantage of the fact that there are almost no shops in the village: according to one of the teachers, there was a time when the **schoolchildren sold their old mobile phones** to migrants who came to the village, at a much higher price than they could have otherwise asked for.

During the time when the asylum center was chronically full, a whole business flourished around **providing accommodation** for the migrants. Many locals accuse the two brothers in Vračević of

profiting from this situation by renting their house to the state, but not providing even basic facilities for the migrants. Many locals also suspect that the director of the asylum center, or other people working there, were in the habit of **taking bribes** from migrants in order to accommodate them in the center. One person even told me that there had been an instance when the police found a few migrants in a weekend cottage, but when they wanted to kick them out the migrants claimed they had paid someone from the asylum center to be accommodated in that cottage. Others also emphasized that break-ins only happen into those cottages where the owners rarely visit, indicating that **some local people are directing the migrants to specific cottages**.

By far the most visible "business" activity in the village are the many **taxis.** Everyone I spoke with had something to say about them – some people complained that the taxi drivers are "rude", while others complained that they constantly block the road in the village center by the shop. Several people also explained to me that those are mostly "illegal" taxis. Two taxi drivers, who themselves emphasized that they had a "legal" taxi, explained to me that those taxis are not registered as taxis and this is what makes them illegal. Theoretically, registered taxis are not allowed to transport migrants, as one of the "legal" taxi driver explained to me, since this counts as **human smuggling**. This also seems to be the main reason why locals perceive the taxis to be illegal. Many people also emphasized to me that the taxi drivers are "not from here", but came from Lazarevac or from further away.

My own experiences only partly confirm this. Some taxi drivers clearly came to Bogovadja because of the migrants. One of them told me openly, upon hearing that I live in Hungary,

> I lived in Tatabanya [in Hungary, near the Austrian border] for two months (...). I was driving people across the border to Austria. Then they arrested me, I spent a month in prison in Hungary and then I came back here.

On the other hand, some taxi drivers are local people, for whom the migrants present a welcome opportunity to make some extra money. When we visited Bogovadja in November, we saw a few

young men standing beside a car by the shop; the car trunk was open, and inside was a taxi sign, ready to be mounted whenever necessary. One afternoon in March, while jotting down some notes from a previous conversation near the village center, a taxi slowed down next to me, and the young driver rolled down the window and asked what I was doing. When I explained I that was a student doing field research, he seemed relieved; he thought I was writing down number plates. He explained to me that he is a "legal" taxi driver, that he only just got his permission three days ago and started driving migrants from the asylum center to the village and back. He told me that he has a job at the Kolubara mines, but does this in his free time to save for his pension.

While it is not the aim of this thesis to present a complete picture of legal or less legal activities in and around Bogovadja, it is crucial to understand this "legal-illegal-continuum" and the local populations' perception of how both state and non-state actors act within this continuum, in order to understand how this reflects on local people's perceptions of the migrants; this is further discussed in the following chapter.

6. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In this part, I treat my interviewees as representatives of a certain point of view and of a certain discourse; the focus is on analyzing the rhetorical strategies that are employed by locals when talking about migrants and migration, and on the conflicting views and discourses that exist among locals as well as between locals and other actors.

Because of the complexities of the situation in Bogovadja, I created several diagrams that map the different aspects, views and relationships of and between different actors in Bogovadja. The diagram below shows the local populations' point of view: the three aspects discussed in chapter 5 are represented by the orange boxes, while other actors – state actors, smugglers, and migrants – are represented by the different ovals:

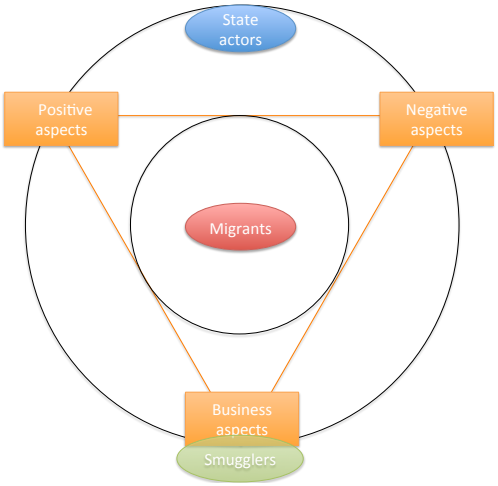

Figure 6. Diagram: The three aspects of the migrants' presence (boxes) and the different actors in Bogovadja (ovals) as seen by locals.

In a first step, I examine locals' perception of the larger phenomena that happen within the transit zone, including their perception of other actors involved (the larger ring in the diagram). In a second step, I discuss on how these perceptions reflect on perceptions of the migrants themselves (the smaller ring in the diagram), and look at other factors – most importantly, personal contact

with migrants and own migration experience – influence the perception of migrants. Finally, I summarize the different discourses within the village and I discuss what my findings add to existing research.

6.1. Perceptions of Bogovadja as a transit place

The local populations' perceptions of Bogovadja as a transit place cannot be understood without examining their perception of two crucial agents who are seen as responsible for the migrants' presence in Bogovadja: the state (and state actors), which is supposed to provide accommodation and a legal status to the migrants, and human smugglers, who facilitate the movement of migrants to and from Bogovadja. The migrants themselves are not seen as the primary agents in this process, but rather as victims, who are taken advantage of by smugglers and abandoned by the state actors (discussed further in chapter 6.2.).

6.1.1. Perceptions on outside actors – the state and the smugglers

Nemanja, whom I interviewed on my first day in Bogovadja, started our conversation by asking me how asylum seekers live in Switzerland. He then went on tell me about relatives who went abroad:

> One of my relatives went to Sweden (...). Now they finally got papers, they have a child together that has Swedish citizenship, they have a solid life. (...) But another friend, he came back to Serbia after 13 years (...). I mean, the West isn't what it used to be. But it's still better than here, it's easier to live there. I mean, at least they have a properly functioning state, a well-functioning system.

The idea that Serbia is not a "properly functioning state" was expressed by many of my interviewees – usually in connection with the idea that there *are* properly functioning countries in "the West" or in "the European Union". Own migration experience to "the West" or – as in Nemanja's case above – the experiences of friends or relatives who went abroad, gives people direct knowledge of how states and governments function in other places, and they judge the

situation in Serbia according to this. The experience of how migration issues are handled in other countries also influences the locals' judgment of the situation in Bogovadja; upon hearing that I am Swiss, several locals rhetorically asked me whether asylum seekers were treated this way in Switzerland, adding that they knew people who went abroad as asylum seekers and that things were certainly not handled this way in Sweden, Germany or Australia. The ideas of how asylum seekers *should* be dealt with were quite divergent – some just said that asylum seekers shouldn't be left to sleep in the forest, while others felt that they should be housed in closed detention centers – but everyone agreed that the way the state treats them in Bogovadja is *not* the "proper" way.

However, accusations against the state go much further than just "not handling the situation well". As discussed in Chapter 5.3., many locals suspect state actors in Bogovadja of engaging in illegal activities, such as taking bribes from asylum seekers or directing them to break into empty cottages. Ana, who actively engages in village politics and helped to organize the various protests that took place told me that

> I really think that the Commissariat is not doing its work properly. For example, once the police came and found them [asylum seekers] in one of the weekend cottages. They told them to leave, but then the asylum seekers said that they paid for this. [They said that] this is part of the asylum center and they paid to be there. Whom did they pay? This means that someone from the center directed them to go there and took money for this. (...)

Although this was the only such explicit example that was recounted to me, the general suspicion that state actors were consciously not handling the situation well in order to generate profit through illicit activities manifested itself in other conversations as well

> *Katarina:* It's only here [in Serbia] that they can walk around freely like this. I have relatives in Australia (...), there they [asylum seekers] have their own settlements, they can't just go everywhere.
> *Željko:* Of course, for those who make money from them, for them this is great.

When asked who "those who make money from them" were, locals mentioned the owners of the shop and of the pubs, and especially the taxi drivers. Although the term "human smuggling" only

came up in one interview, everyone who mentioned the taxi drivers also at some point mentioned that the taxi drivers take the migrants to Subotica (near the border) or to Hungary. The owners of the shop and of the pubs are suspected of facilitating this; state actors – the director of the asylum center as well as the police – are also suspected of either actively facilitating these connections, or at the very least taking bribes to turn a blind eye to it. As Ana explained to me:

> We call them taxi drivers, but they aren't taxi drivers (...), they are part of a group that makes money from this... it's typical human smuggling. And the police knows about this, Sjekloća [the director of the asylum center] knows this, the [Serbian] state even knows this! (...) They ask 200 Euros to take them to Subotica, or even more, I saw this on TV.

In this way, it can be said that locals perceive state actors and smugglers to be a "continuum", who consciously handle the asylum seekers in a certain way in order to maximize the profits they can make from them:

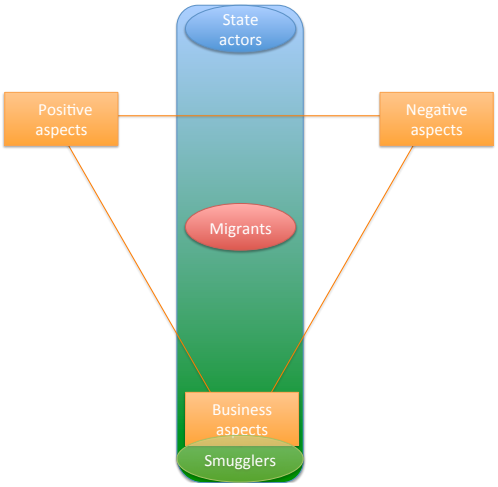

Figure 7. Diagram: The local populations' perception of state actors and smugglers as a continuum.

Not surprisingly, many migrants have a similar perspective, according to a report of Human Rights Watch (2015); my own conversations with migrants confirm this. For the migrants, this

view is based on direct experiences of cooperation between the police and smugglers; Human Rights Watch cites a Syrian migrant who says,

> We were on our way to Subotica when we were stopped by the police. (...) We had to pay bribes twice, the first time 200 Euros and the second time 100 Euros. At one point our driver flashed his lights as we were approaching the police to signal for the police to stop us. I am 100 percent sure that there was an agreement between the driver and the police to split the bribe money.[50]

Possibly, some locals have also heard such stories directly from migrants, although no one explicitly mentioned this.

In summary, the general attitude that Serbia is not a "properly functioning country", the knowledge of how asylum migration is handled in "Western" countries, and the specific situation that locals witness in Bogovadja – migrants sleeping outside or in weekend houses and taxi drivers bringing them from and to the borders – combine into a very critical stance towards state actors, specifically towards the Commissariat and its employees and towards the police.

6.1.2. Conflicting discourses within the village – protesters and profiteers

As can be seen from above discussion, most locals are very critical about anyone who profits from the migrants' presence. This criticism was brought up mostly by the more "problem-focused" interviewees and directed first and foremost against taxi drivers, whom many locals also perceive as annoying in a more general sense because they cause more traffic and they block the road in the village center or because they are just generally "rude". However, the criticism of profiting from the migrants was also brought up against the owners of the shop and of the two pubs; several interviewees also warned me that "these people will only tell you good things about the asylum seekers", implying that they are not to be trusted.

Those who criticize the "profiteers" framed "profiting from the migrants" mainly as an immoral activity, as "profiting from other people's misery", as one interviewee put it. The argument that some of these activities are also unlawful came up much less often; if at all, locals claimed that

[50] "Ryiad", a young Syrian. Quoted from Human Rights Watch (2015)

the taxi drivers were themselves "illegal". One reason for this may the above-discussed mistrust of the state in general and the police in particular, making the "legality" criterion less relevant.

An older man, whom I met along the main road, explicitly warned me not to engage with any of the taxi drivers in the village and told me very heatedly that "they are not from here, they all came from other places!". As discussed in Chapter 5.3., my own experiences confirm that some taxi drivers did come from other places, but others are locals. Other interviewees conceded that some of the taxi drivers are from Bogovadja, but several of the more "problem-focused" interviewees excluded them from the rhetorical "we" that they used when describing the problems in the village and their reasons for protesting. As Gordana, who was also active in organizing protests, told me:

> Sjekloća [the director of the asylum center] says that *we* live on their costs. It's shameful to say such a thing! People in Bogovadja have pretty good salaries. There are the opencast [Kolubara] mines, everyone... well, most people work there, they have decent salaries. So it's shameful to say that *we* live off them, that *we* take 200 Euros or I don't know how much to bring them to Subotica. But really, that's how much *they* [the taxi drivers] ask. *(Emphasis added, NR.)*

Without explicitly saying so, she excludes the taxi drivers from the majority of "people in Bogovadja", by emphasizing that "everyone... well, most people" make a living through a decent job that has nothing to do with the asylum seekers, and saying that "we" would not engage in this kind of business with them, but "they" do. She then admitted that some people do profit from the migrants' presence, but kept on referring to "them" as opposed to "us":

> But some people actually do make money from them. (...) The pub, the shop... but everything there costs a lot. Some people also exchange Euros, but all those services cost much more [than they should]. That's it. So it's not us who are against them [the asylum seekers], but a few individuals – in fact, those who defend this, that they [the asylum seekers] stay here like this. They are against them. Because all of those who defend them, they either drive them here, or they sell them something.

By saying that they are just in for it for the money, she delegitimizes the voice of anyone who defends the migrants' presence in Bogovadja. Other interviewees, who warned me not to believe what the shop owner or taxi drivers say, use a similar strategy.

In summary, while many locals do profit from the migrants' presence to a certain degree – whether this means driving a taxi, working for the Red Cross, or just selling an old mobile phone – many interviewees clearly distanced themselves from those who make a profit from them. The local population and the "profiteers" (including human smugglers) can also be seen as a continuum:

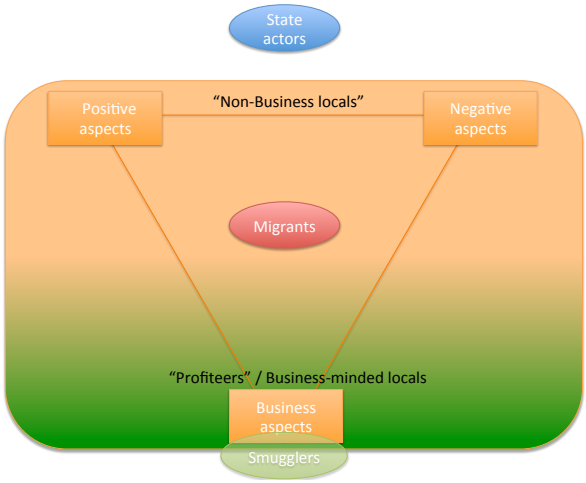

Figure 8. Diagram: The local populations' self-perception: locals and "profiteers" (including smugglers) as a continuum.

Not everyone in the local population shares the view that profiting from the migrants is bad. A minority of people – the generally more migrant-focused interviewees – did not bring up the taxi drivers or other people who profit in a critical way. And of course the taxi drivers themselves see this differently, too. In the interviews, they – consciously or unconsciously – interpreted protests and criticism as being directed against the migrants, explaining it with irrational fears in the local population. As one of the local taxi drivers, Danilo, put it:

> *Danilo*: There were problems earlier, when they [the asylum seekers] came. You know, people will be people, they say all kinds of things. But now they got used to them.
> *Me*: But there were those protests recently?
> *Danilo*: Ah, they're just crazy. You know how people are, they will just believe all kinds of stuff.

Concluding from this, there are conflicting views and discourses between those locals who profit from the situation in Bogovadja and those who protest against it, with each side delegitimizing the other's claims. This view is also shared by several professionals who work with the migrants in Bogovadja but do not live in the village; as one of them put it,

> The asylum seekers are not problematic, they really don't cause any problems. This was more a political thing, that people protested. (...) It was in fact more of a problem between locals, that some people are making a lot of money from them [the asylum seekers] while others don't get anything.

6.2. Perceptions of the migrants transiting through Bogovadja

In this part, I zoom in on the migrant-local relationship and examine how local perceptions of Bogovadja as a transit place influences their perception of the migrants moving within it. Following that, I discuss further factors that influence the local populations' perceptions; most importantly, personal contact with migrants and own migration experience.

6.2.1. How the bad conditions reflect on perceptions of migrants

As described in the previous subchapter, locals generally hold the state as well as human smugglers responsible for the bad situation that they witness in Bogovadja, and everyone I spoke with agreed that the state is not handling things properly. But beyond that, not everyone felt the same about the degree to which the migrants themselves can be held responsible for the situation. These opinions surfaced mostly indirectly: while everyone I spoke to was quick to assure me that "we have nothing against the migrants", the statements that some people made do reveal that they have a rather negative picture of them. For example, several people generalized the fact that there is a lot of litter in the village by saying that the migrants are "dirty". When speaking about migrants sleeping in the woods, some people implied that they willfully live in these "awful conditions" and that they don't wash themselves, while others found it offensive that migrants were washing themselves at a public fountain in the village; two interviewees believed that the

facility of the Red Cross must be "ruined" because the migrants lived there. Some people also blamed the fact that they come to Bogovadja "illegally" on the migrants themselves. This negative image of the migrants usually cumulated in the demand that the asylum center should be a closed asylum center and that the migrants shouldn't be allowed to "walk around freely".

However, other locals expressed more understanding for the situation which the migrants are in and felt that they are not to blame; in fact, some people seemed sympathetic towards the migrants *because* of the bad conditions, and felt that both locals and migrants are victims of a badly functioning state. Some interviewees were aware of the fact that the police doesn't always register migrants and that they don't have access to accommodation because of that; some also emphasized that they just break into weekend cottages because they are cold and need a place to sleep, and that they never steal anything or do any other harm. Many people told me that they had seen migrants who were sick or barefoot in the middle of winter, and families with children, and that they felt especially sorry for them. These more sympathetic people generally felt that the state should provide adequate accommodation for all migrants, but didn't say that the asylum center should be a closed asylum center.

However, these two tendencies are rarely seen as contradicting or conflicting; since everyone in the village agrees that the situation is *not* being handled properly, there are few discussions about how the situation *should* be handled, and most locals don't even seem aware of these different opinions and tendencies. One particularly enlightening example of this is worth quoting at some length:

> *Gordana*: We are protesting against the state because they behave like this towards them [the asylum seekers] and also towards us. So, in the beginning they were accommodated in the asylum center. But then they started coming in large numbers, because they called their people [their families, friends etc.], so an enormous number of people comes and then all those weekend cottages around the center were broken into, more than 50. One month ago a cottage burnt down, maybe you heard about this. But nobody reported this, because it isn't profitable for anyone to report this. It's really shameful.
> *Ana:* But they have to break in there, because...
> *Gordana* (interrupts): But they really lit a fire there.

> *Ana:* Nobody lives there, maybe some local person told them that nobody lives there, that the owners are in Belgrade (...). So they light a fire because they are cold.
> *Gordana:* But, for example, they don't know how to light a fire in the right place, they don't light it in the fireplace but in the middle of the room. (...) And then they leave feces everywhere. They don't know how to... well, many don't know how to use a toilet. Instead they do it behind the door or...
> *Ana* (interrupts): Yes, but the owners [of the cottage] turn off the water when they leave.
> Gordana: The water is turned off, but when they [the owners] come back usually the cottage isn't inhabitable anymore. Even if they renovate it they can't live there anymore.

What is remarkable about this dialogue is that the two women don't openly disagree with each other at any point. They obviously have different views regarding the migrants, with Gordana blaming the migrants, whom she apparently deems wholly uncivilized, for "ruining" the cottages, and Ana excusing each point with external factors, such as the fact that the migrants don't have anywhere else to sleep or don't have access to running water. However, they don't seem to be conscious of the fact that they have opposing views of the migrants, because they are both focused on the wrongdoings of the state first and foremost. Both of them were actively involved in the organization of the protests and didn't seem to feel that their views differ at all.

6.2.2. How personal contact with migrants affects perceptions

As discussed in Chapter 2.2, personal contact between groups cannot be taken for granted, because feelings of threat or other reservations may prevent people from stepping into contact with one another. In Bogovadja, there seem to be a few people who try to avoid contact with the migrants, though no one I spoke to openly admitted that they did not want to have anything to do with them. One woman did tell me that some of her neighbors "hate" them and that they turned off the water in their yard so that the migrants couldn't get water there.

The fact that some migrants in Bogovadja are missing such elementary things as access to running water and warm clothes or shelter in Winter also creates space for a range of good-willed gestures from the locals towards the migrants. Several people reported giving water, vegetables and fruit from their garden, and also clothes and blankets to migrants who passed by their house or whom they met in the village. This informal giving often leads to personal exchange as well,

and many people recounted personal stories that migrants had told them. Even people who told me that they don't know any foreign languages had stories of interactions with migrants; children in the primary school recounted a birthday pick nick where some migrants had joined them spontaneously, and Mirjana, an old lady whom I chatted with while she fed the cats and chicken in her yard, told me,

> The migrants? They don't disturb me. You see, I'm feeding these cats as well, even though not one of them is mine... In Winter they shoveled the snow for me. Sometimes they sit on my fence, because there is internet here. So I tell them, why are you sitting on the fence, come and sit on the porch. Once, a girl and two boys came, all of them black. I brought them coffee and cake, and they were so happy! They showed me pictures of their families on their phone, [they said] this is my Mama, this is my Papa... another time we were roasting a piglet behind the house, and these two black men came to see. We invited them to eat with us, and they took a lot of pictures of us with their phone, they always wanted to take pictures together...

She told me that her son knows some English, and during the barbecue he had been there, but even when she was alone with the migrants they found a way of communicating through pictures and simple words like "Mama" and "Papa". Almost everyone who recounted these interactions did it in a sympathetic way, often with a pitying undertone – especially when they talked about families, children, or in one case about a migrant who had lost his family.

However, on a few people these personal interactions also left a negative impression. In particular, several people told me that there are sometimes drunk migrants in front of the shop in the village center. Milena, a teen-aged girl, recounted an unpleasant experience:

> My cousin worked in the shop over the summer and I was helping her. Once a drunken asylum seeker came, and he wanted to buy beer. But there was no more beer in the shop that day, and he started to shout at us, that we are racists and things like that. Then he started to reel around, he was completely drunk. We got scared, and we called her mother and her brother to help us.

Several locals also reported that they had seen migrants throwing their clothes away, and that they often find clothes by the side of the road, and many people complained about migrants who litter, and about migrants who wash themselves at public fountains. These observations also reflect larger fears of water contamination and diseases. However, while these observations are a result of physical proximity to the migrants, they are not "contact" in the sense of a direct

interaction between migrants and locals; the incident with the drunken migrant was the only example of a negative face-to-face.

On the other hand, although most of my interviewees could recall at least some fleeting interaction with migrants, few reported friendships or longer relationships. "They don't stay here for long" was the most frequent answer when asked about this. Only the case with the family from Somalia seems to be different: the two boys stayed in school for several months, and students and teachers are still in contact with the family. The fact that there is so little sustained, long-term interaction means that migrants rarely rise beyond being viewed as either victims or threats by the locals. Besides personal friendships, a good education or the fact that they "made it to the West" are what makes locals view migrants as agents in their own right (further discussed in chapter 6.2.4.).

6.2.3. How own migration experience affects perceptions

Migration plays a role in the lives of all my interviewees: A few of them have migrated themselves, either as refugees or as foreign workers, and many of them expressed an intention to go abroad, or said that they had had this intention at some point. Also, almost everyone I spoke to mentioned at least one relative or friend who went abroad, either to work or to seek asylum. This direct or indirect migration experience affects the views of locals in several ways: on the one hand, some people expressed understanding and empathy towards the migrants who are going through this situation. The facility of the Red Cross had served as a shelter for refugees from the Yugoslav wars in the 1990ies, and many of those refugees still live in Bogovadja today. As Marija told me,

> I went through all of this, I am a refugee from Bosnia. (...) And for them, it's even harder. They don't speak the language, they don't have anyone here. No friends, no relatives, no one. It's very hard for them. I absolutely understand them, because I went through the same procedure. I was a refugee for many years, and stayed here in the end.

Other people showed a similar understanding towards people who migrate, for example Zorica who complained that all the young people are leaving the village. On the other hand, some people used their migration experience to emphasize that they are different from the migrants who come to Bogovadja. Gordana recalled the refugees from the 1990ies but told me immediately that

> Then, it was completely different. Everyone knew, they [the refugees] are in the Red Cross [facility], those who couldn't be there were accommodated in private homes, I also signed up to house refugees. But you can't compare this at all.

This view could be seen as a confirmation of the hypothesis that there is more trust in homogenous communities, as discussed in Chapter 2.2:[51] the refugees who came in the 1990ies were of Serbian ethnicity, and apparently locals had so much trust towards them that they were willing to take them into their own home. On the other hand, this was a fundamentally different situation both historically and also in terms of the refugees, who were not transiting through but came to Bogovadja with the intention of staying there (or eventually returning to Bosnia and Croatia). Also, the migrants who come to Bogovadja today are by law not allowed to stay in private homes, and in practice the police even forbid them to be in locals' yards (as discussed in Chapter 5.3.2).

As discussed in Chapter 6.1., locals know from own experience how migrants are dealt with "in the West", and some locals mix criticism of the State is mixed with criticism of the migrants themselves. As Nemanja, the man with the relative in Sweden, explained:

> I'll tell you how it is in Sweden, my relative was there, and this was a closed center. He had to get a permission to go to the city. (...) He was allowed to look for work, this wasn't a problem, he got the permission, went to work and came back. It's not a jail, but still you can't just let people wander freely... because after all you're not in your own country.

While he doesn't say this directly, this statement implies criticism and a certain mistrust towards the migrants who just "walk around freely" in Bogovadja. At the same time, it is also self-critical; apparently, he didn't feel that his relative was being mistreated in Sweden, but felt that it was

[51] See all Putnam (2007), Laitin (2011), Birte and Gundelach (2013).

justified that he had to stay in a closed asylum center. He also told another story about a friend who went to Germany and got fined for throwing garbage on the ground, criticizing his friend for the same things that he criticized the migrants for. Another young man, Zlatko, was even more self-reflexive about his experiences in the West, connecting this experience to the way migrants in Bogovadja are seen:

> In the West, when you say you're a Serb, then everybody looks a bit strangely. And the way we see them here, it's the same as they see us there [in the West].

While this young man connected Serbs going abroad with migrants coming to Bogovadja, another woman, Jovana, recounted an actual occurrence when a relative found herself in the same situation as a migrant who had been in Bogovadja:

> *Jovana:* My cousin is in Norway. She only just got the papers to join her husband there, and now she enrolled in a Norwegian language course. And imagine that, recently she wrote to me that one of her course mates is an asylum seeker who was in Bogovadja. (...) He even speaks a little Serbian, she said. A man from Eritrea. And if he is enrolled in this language course, this means that he already got all his papers for Norway. So he was able to achieve one of his dreams. Because...
> *Marija:* Wonderful.
> *Jovana:* Even to us, Norway is wonderful (...). A properly functioning country.

This is an interesting example because it highlights the shared migration experience of locals and migrants; hearing these concrete stories from migrants who "made it" to the European Union and are – supposedly – living a good life there also seems to influence the way locals perceive them: in this case, as someone who also has his own dreams and acts in a certain way in order to achieve them.

6.2.4. Views on migrants: victims, intruders, business opportunities – or agents in their own right

The summary of how locals view migrants brings us back to the three aspects discussed in Chapter 5.3. Local people tend to gravitate to one of those three aspects and accordingly see migrants either as a people who are partly responsible for bad circumstances and threats such as water contamination or the spread of diseases; or as victims of these threatening circumstances;

or as an opportunity to make money. Accordingly, they either protest against these circumstances, pity the migrants, or profit from them in various ways.

Most personal interactions with immigrants are positive; however, not everyone translates this to a generally positive perception of migrants, since some people also observe migrants who, in their opinion, behave inappropriately. The fact that most migrants don't stay in Bogovadja for long discourages deeper personal contact and makes the building of mutual trust almost impossible, and the impression that new, unknown and "illegal" migrants arrive in Bogovadja almost every day further contributes to the perception of migrants as a threat.

However, there are a few factors that contribute to the perception of migrants as agents in their own right, rather than just as victims, intruders, or opportunities for business. If locals learn more about the background of a migrant the meet, particularly about their family or about their education, or if they talk about migrants who "made it to the West" (which many locals see as desirable for themselves as well), then they are more likely to refer to them not just as victims or intruders, but as actors who made certain decisions and who have plans for the future.

6.3. Discussion

6.3.1. Discourses between different actors

As discussed earlier in Chapter 5.3 and in Chapter 6.2., there is no open disagreement among villagers regarding the migrants. However, when inspected more closely, several conflicts emerge, between villagers and state actors as well as among villagers. For the following discussion, it is again useful to keep this diagram in mind:

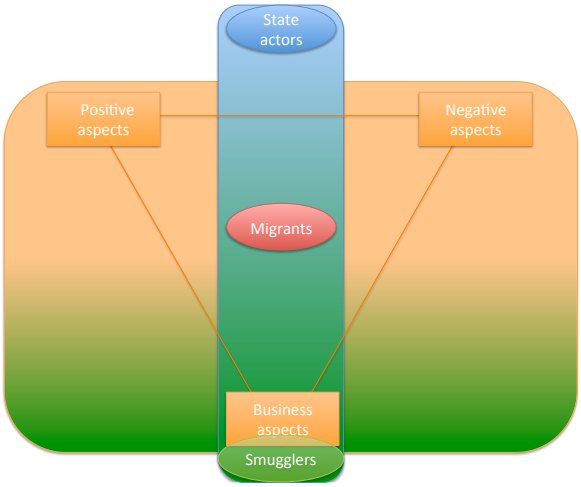

Figure 9. Diagram: Local perceptions on migrants in Bogovadja, including perception of the state-smuggler continuum and the locals-smugglers continuum

Chapter 5.3. discusses three aspects of the migrants' presence in Bogovadja as seen by locals (represented by the three orange squares in the diagram): the positive, the negative, and the business aspect. Those locals whom I interviewed at length generally mentioned all three aspects at some point; however, some had a clear tendency to focus on the negative aspects, while others talked mostly about positive ones. Those who focused more on the negative sides were also more focused on the larger circumstances and different actors within the transit zone, while the more positive interviewees were more focused on the migrants they meet in everyday life. Demographically speaking, there migrant-focused interviewees are older, less educated, and less mobile (they leave Bogovadja less often, since they are either pensioners or work in the village). The problem-focused interviewees are younger, more educated and more mobile. This makes them demographically closer to the cottage owners who live in Belgrade and whom I would also expect to be more problem-focused, since they are only affected by the break-ins into their cottages and don't have any other contact with migrants.

These problem-focused locals are also the ones who publicly complain and actively protest against the situation in Bogovadja. Their protests are directed mainly against state actors, in particular the Commissariat and its representative in Bogovadja, Stojan Sjekloća (the director of the asylum center). However, these state actors – deliberately or unintentionally – re-interprete these protests to be against the migrants, and accuse locals either of being "racist" or of being "uneducated" and easy to manipulate, for example by political leaders or the cottage owners from Belgrade. These accusations are mirrored in local people's assertions that they are *not* racists – this was often one of the first things that people emphasized to me. My conversations with both state employees and other professionals confirm these ideas of the "backwardness" of the local population. Some of them may genuinely feel that locals are racists: after all, the most vocal locals are also the most problem-focused ones, and some of them do have a very negative image of migrants (as discussed in Chapter 6.2.1).[52] Others – especially the director of the asylum center and the police – may use this strategy to deflect the criticism directed against them and defend their own position and actions.

A similar conflict emerges between problem-focused locals and business-focused locals (mainly taxi drivers). The problem-focused locals also protest against the taxi drivers and accuse them of unjustly profiting from the migrants' misery. Just like the state actors, the taxi drivers re-interpret these protests to be against the migrants; they, too, accuse the locals either of being racists or of being backward and therefore easy to manipulate.

Last but not least, the police seems to be actively influencing the local populations' views: by forbidding the old ladies to invite migrants into their garden or house, they encourage the idea

[52] A whole lot more could be said about the relationship between state and other outside actors and the local population; however, this is not the main focus of this thesis.

that the migrants are somehow dangerous and hinder positive contact and interactions between locals and migrants.

The police and taxi drivers – who seem to be working together, according to reports of locals and migrants[53] – both have an obvious interest in delegitimizing criticism of their work. Those locals who actively protest and voice concerns are well aware of these strategies. Gordana, who was one of the organizers of the protests, said,

> They [the migrants] always never break into those cottages that the owners visit every weekend. They only break into those where the owners almost never come... so someone [from the asylum center] must be directing them to go there. But then when we complain [to the authorities], then they turn this against us, they say that we are racists, that we don't recognize [cultural] differences, which isn't true. It isn't true at all, it's simply that we know best what is going on here.

Besides delegitimizing protests with accusations of racism, those who organize illicit activities have an interest in preventing others from being too informed in the first place – which may well be the police's intention behind forbidding locals to invite migrants. As Hamid, a migrant who spent several months in Bogovadja, explained to me:

> Bogovadja is a small village. You think when smugglers take people to the border, the police doesn't know about it? Of course they know. So they don't want people in the village to have an emotional connection to the refugees. There shouldn't be a big group of people who care about them. (...) It's better for the police if the local people don't know too much about it, how they come here, how they leave and where they go.

In summary, there are some locals who are focused mostly on the migrants themselves; these people tend towards emphasizing the positive aspects of their presence, and when they mention the bad circumstances, they do so mostly in the context of feeling sorry for the migrants. Other locals focus more on these bad circumstances, which they blame on actors whom they believe profit from this: the director of the asylum center, the police, and human smugglers. These actors, on the other hand, try to deflect this criticism by accusing the locals of being racists and of protesting against the migrants; the fact that some of the people who protest *do* display racist tendencies further complicates the situation. The "protesters" also tend to be more vocal about

[53] See also Human Rights Watch (2015).

their concerns and claim to speak for everyone in the village, while the migrant-focused people were more differentiated about different opinions and expressed understanding for those who protested. Since the more migrant-focused people also expressed the most feelings of pity towards the migrants, they could be expected to join the protests; however, none of those whom I spoke to actually did:

> *Marija:* I didn't attend any of those protests.
> *Jovana:* No, I really didn't want to participate there.
> *Me*: So who participated?
> *Jovana*: Locals. Well, you know, people have different opinions. Different points of view, it depends – Marija here, who was herself a refugee (...)
> *Marija* interrupts:: No, but they weren't... I wouldn't want any anyone to misunderstand those locals [who took part in the protests]. (...) They weren't against *them* [the asylum seekers]. This whole thing isn't handled the way it should be. They come in the winter, they don't have a place to sleep, then there are those weekend cottages... well, that's why. Of course, nobody likes this, they say that they leave a terrible mess in those cottages.

These reservations against attending the protests could mean that some villagers do perceive the protesters as "racists" and do not want to participate in something that could be understood to be against the migrants.

Because they are more vocal, the complaints and protests of the more problem-focused villagers are the only ones that reach an audience beyond Bogovadja. And because authorities and other outside actors tend to understand and frame these protests as being against the migrants, this creates the impression – to other villagers but also to the outside world – that "there is a problem with the migrants", which for many people translates to "the migrants are problematic". This impression is especially prevalent outside of Bogovadja, where people get their information only from hearsay or through the media; several people in Lajkovac explained to me that "the migrants caused problems" in Bogovadja; even though they could not specify what those problems were, the fact that there had been a demonstration in Bogovadja was proof enough for them that "migrants cause problems".

6.3.2. Contact and threat in the transit zone

At this point, I find it helpful to review the initial questions that guided my research:

How do locals in Bogovadja perceive and interact with migrants who transit through Bogovadja? What factors influence these views and actions? In particular, how does the fact that they live in a transit place shape their views and attitudes towards migrants?

In answer to this, I can definitely say that being in a transit place, within a larger transit zone, has a huge influence on the way locals perceive migrants. All three aspects – the good, the bad, and the business aspect – of the migrants' presence, and the corresponding reactions of pitying, protesting or profiting, are firmly situated within the understanding Bogovadja is a transit place and all of Serbia is a transit zone: Those people who profit from the migrants base their business directly on this assumption, while those who protest against the bad conditions, and those who simply pity the migrants for their plight, also do not question the fact that the migrants are just passing through, that they come from the South and head to the North.

The transit zone also has a direct influence on contact opportunities between migrants and locals, and a less direct influence on how perceptions of threat come about among locals. In the following, final diagram, I superimpose the theoretical framework I introduced in Chapter 2:

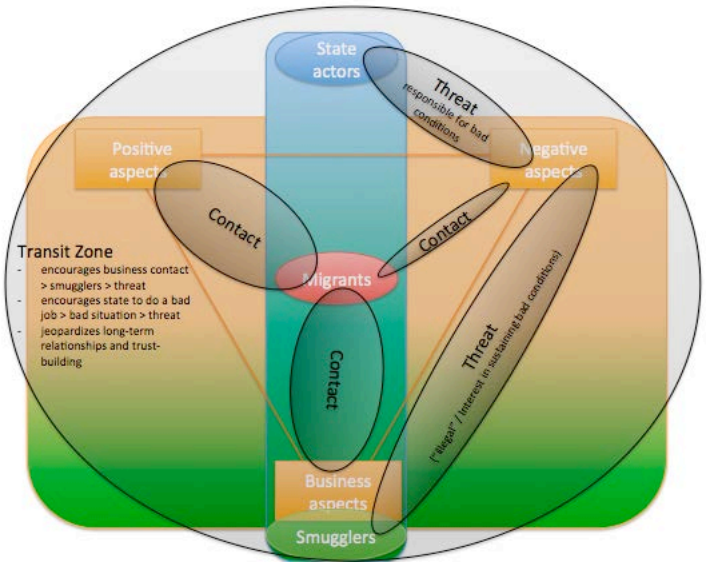

Figure 10. Diagram: How the transit zone, contact and threat influence different perceptions of migrants in Bogovadja.

The positive aspects and the business aspects of the migrants' presence are directly connected to the migrants . Direct positive contact with the migrants in the form of help, hospitality or friendship generally leads to a positive view on them; direct contact leading to a negative impression is much more rare. Direct contact with the migrants also leads to a wealth of business opportunities, and the opportunity for business leads some locals to seek direct contact with migrants.

Feelings of threat, on the other hand, are only indirectly connected to the migrants: even though they are triggered by their presence, the migrants are not held responsible for them; rather, state actors and human smugglers are blamed. State actors are mainly seen as responsible for the bad, unhygienic conditions in which some of the migrants are forced to live, while taxi drivers/smugglers are perceived to be directly connected to the migrants "illegality"; both the bad sanitary conditions and the illegal status of the migrants are perceived to pose a threat to the local population, mainly in the form of a diffuse danger of diseases and water contamination.

The fact that Bogovadja is a transit place further influences perceptions and interactions in the following ways:

- The hidden and illegalized nature of the migrants' travel through Serbia is perceived as threat in itself; beyond that, it also discourages both migrants and locals from seeking contact with one another, for fear of legal consequences (such as being accused of human smuggling).
- Even when contact does come about, the fact that migrants don't stay for long also jeopardizes the building of trust and long-term friendships (which could greatly reduce feelings of threat) between migrants and locals.
- The fact that migrants plan to move on provides an incentive for state actors to put off the registration and proper accommodation of migrants, since many of them will simply move on in the meantime; this means that state actors have a direct incentive to leave the bad conditions in Bogovadja as they are.

In summary, the transit zone has a large and largely negative influence on the way migrants are treated and perceived while in Bogovadja; I discuss the larger implications of this in the conclusion.

7. CONCLUSIONS

With this thesis, I contribute to the understanding of how opinions and discourses towards migrants in transit are formed in a local context. Rather than just measuring opinions and attitudes, I try to map out the various aspects of the migrants' presence, track the discourses that arise from these aspects, and show how these in turn influence perceptions of the migrants.

I set out for Bogovadja in order to examine the attitudes of the local population towards the migrants who transit through the village. Quite frankly, I was overwhelmed by the diversity and complexity of the various discourses and interactions that I discovered while I was there. Selecting and categorizing the relevant material from a wealth of field data was a challenge, as was creating an adequate theoretical framework to fit my findings.

I did my best to present what I see as the most relevant factors that influence the local populations' perceptions and interactions with the migrants; the complexity and multilayeredness of the discourses within the village made me refrain from reflecting on the larger context and discussing wider notions and implications regarding asylum seekers and transit migrants in Serbia. In what follows, I briefly point to a range of issues that *could* have been discussed:

- None of the people I spoke with questioned the legitimacy of the migrants coming to Serbia and traveling on to Europe. Of course, many people would prefer they wouldn't come to their *village*, but virtually nobody said anything against them coming to Serbia; though some people didn't approve of illeal border crossers, their main worry in connection with this was the fact that the migrants were not examined by any doctor before coming to the village.

- Likewise, the idea of "false asylum seekers" did not come up at all when referring to the migrants in Bogovadja – even though the concept does exist in Serbia and is regularly invoked the media when discussing Serbian nationals who seek asylum in EU countries. If at all, locals assumed that those migrants in Bogovadja are the "real" asylum seekers, who have the right to

receive asylum in an EU country, while they, the Serbs, cannot claim this right. Then notion of "economic migrants" was also totally absent from the discourse about the migrants in Bogovadja.

- As discussed in Chapter 4, the perspective of the migrants themselves is largely absent from this thesis. The local population tends to see them either as causes or victims of the bad circumstances, or as an opportunity for business. Since taxi drivers and other "businessmen" are also underrepresented in my sample, this third perspective did not come up much; however, one could argue that they see the migrants "clients". This perspective allows for the consideration of migrants as agents in their own right, who come to Bogovadja because of certain services that they can access there – and, contrary to the ideas of some of the locals, migrants are not just brought to Bogovadja, but come their out of choice and often even by foot. With this perspective, it's not the taxi drivers and other "businessmen" who exploit the migrants, but the migrants themselves who create the demand for certain kinds of services.

Coming back to the perception of the local population, this thesis raises one big question for me: How do the circumstances under which migrants lives and/or travels influence the way they are seen by locals, and what happens when images and reports of these circumstances travel beyond a local context?

While my case study does provide a partial answer to this question, I find that especially the second part of it is worth pursuing in much more depth both in theory and in practice.

This question is important because migrants and especially asylum seekers don't leave the transit zone behind when they cross the border into the European Union. On the contrary: Upon entrance into the EU they are swallowed up by a different and much more official "transit system", in which they are sent from member state to member state under the Dublin regulation, and when they finally arrive in a member state that agrees to process their asylum request, they are still pushed around between different asylum centers and subjected to a wait which can last for years,

during which their status and future remain unclear and insecure. For local populations everyhwere in Europe, this makes it difficult to form trust and meaningful relationships with asylum seekers; as we have seen, the combination of marginalization and being in transit jeopardizes positive contact and relationships and makes it easier for political or other actors to spread negative prejudice. With this thesis, I hope to contribute to a better understanding of these processes, and I very much hope that this understanding will translate into actions and policies that change the way that migrants, asylum seekers, refugees are treated in Europe today.

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