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# BEYOND VICTIMHOOD AND STIGMATIZATION

Trauma, Ruptured Memories and Agency  
in the Context of Global Migration

## Becoming the asylum seeker for the first time: The case of Iranians in Serbia

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### Subject / Abstract (1000 characters)

Due to the events related to the visa-free regime between the Republic of Serbia and the Islamic Republic of Iran, some Iranian citizens who arrived in Serbia by airplane, ended up in camps and became the asylum seekers for the first time. Unlike other people accommodated in reception and asylum centers in Serbia, they did not experience any elements of „refugeehood“ before the arrival in Serbia – they were not walking through hills and forest for days, sleeping in refugee camps or squats, nor crossing the borders irregularly. They arrived as regular tourists. I will consider how their life experiences became ruptured by gaining the status of asylum seekers for the first time, and what narratives are expressed to construct or reject the identity of the refugee. I will present some insights from ethnographic fieldwork conducted both inside and outside of the camps and also try to contribute to the theoretical debate about coercion and agency in (forced) migration studies.



### (Research) Questions with regard to trauma & migration (400 characters)

- What are the potential dangers of addressing subjectivity and agency in the asylum seekers' experiences with trauma?
- How various actors engage in the field of psychotraumatology of the exile?
- Is trauma limited to experiences in the so-called country of origin? Can we displace the matter of force, coercion and violence from countries of the Global South to 'safe countries' of the Global North and its periphery?
- How do we approach violence perpetrated in the name of securing the EU's external borders? Do people on the move experience trauma due to physical and structural violence of borders? How do they struggle with these experiences?
- How do we address the violence without victimization of people suffering it?

### Theoretical approach / analytical framework with regard to trauma (700 characters)

My approach is shaped by anthropological education, but theoretical interpretations are at the intersection of critical forced migration studies and critical border regime studies. Here, asylum seeker is understood as bureaucratic label and changeable legal status established by international humanitarian protection regime, appearing in different national contexts. Humanitarian policies are grounded in the principle to preserve human life and in compassion for traumatic experiences and physical suffering. Trauma is utilized as a resource that could support a right to humanitarian aid and asylum. Encampment is also a humanitarian policy, designed as a response to crisis, where people are seen to be out of place, either in a place of danger or creating danger for others.

### Empirical findings / observations (700 characters)

Seeking asylum in Serbia is long and uncertain process, which depends on proving traumatic experiences. Seeking asylum in Serbia is characterized both by the lack of opportunities to reach EU countries and the desire to continue 'normal life', which my interlocutors presented as the opposite from 'camp life'. There are two basic types of camps in Serbia: asylum centers and reception centers. People on the move enter the asylum procedure because get tired from constant struggle to live decent lives, to cross the border, but also because they have established personal or professional connections in Serbia, so they want continue their lives outside of the Serbian camps. Those who have never been encamped or labelled as asylum seekers experienced more drastic ruptures.

### Methods (700 characters)

Interpretations of issues related to trauma and migration are drawn from ethnographic research, conducted through my PhD research and through "The European Irregularized Migration Regime at the Periphery of the EU: from Ethnography to Keywords" (ERIM) collective research project. The ethnographic material includes semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, observations, fieldwork notes and secondary data. My observations were influenced by the engagement in providing help to people on the move, which took place before the beginning of research and academic work. I reflect upon both my own and collective research as 'anthropology of taking sides' and reject the myth of objective anthropology/ethnography.

### Motivation, Input Thoughts and Questions (400 characters)

- Coming from the field of anthropology and migration studies, I've encountered with literature that considers victimization of migrants and their agency, and I hope that I will get the opportunity to expand these insights during this workshop
- I have chosen to do a case study of asylum seekers from Iran in Serbia, because they became an interesting example of how migration and visa policies in the aftermath of 2015 contributed to formation of particular identities

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### Bio (350 characters)

Teodora Jovanović is a researcher and anthropologist. Besides writing a PhD thesis, she participates in research projects related to migration and borders. This work has been fully supported by Croatian Science Foundation under the project "The European Irregularized Migration Regime at the Periphery of the EU: from Ethnography to Keywords" (IP-2019-04-6642).

