

Migrants and refugee in camps in Western Balkans: the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Introduction

This essay aims at presenting the topic of refugee camps in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a controversial aspect of the recent migration flows coming to Continental Europe. In particular, this paper will focus on the Temporary Reception Center of Lipa: a refugee camp located in the canton of Una-Sana, close to the border with Croatia. The decision to present the case of Lipa is based on two main reasons. To begin with, Lipa perfectly represents the problematics and complexity of refugee camps in general. Camps for migrants and refugees are often complex facilities in which living conditions tend to be poor, and which usually produce segregation and marginalization of the people living there from the rest of the society (Brambilla et al., 2021). In this sense, Lipa is a good example of what the French anthropologist defines as “*non-places*”: big transience places that do not confer a feeling of place and where human beings remain anonymous. Secondly, Lipa embodies the contradictions and the negative side effects of European migration policies, above all the externalization of frontiers, through which the European Union confines and tightens controls at its external borders with the intention to keep migrants and refugees outside of its territories, confined in non-EU transit countries, like Bosnia and Herzegovina (Astuti et al., 2021).

The Balkan Route

The Balkan route is a complex and dangerous migration route that in the last years has become the main channel through which millions of migrants and refugees try to reach Europe so as to escape from wars, persecution, violence, destruction, poverty... Most of the people who undertake this route are single men, but on many occasions also unaccompanied minors and families, coming mainly from the Middle East and Asia. One thing is sure, the Balkan Route is not an easy path: people often move on foot with barely any property of their own, undergoing severe weather conditions, including snowstorms and temperatures below 0 degrees Celsius. On top of that, there are violence and abuses committed by both human traffickers and authorities. Their *trip* is made even more difficult by the undeniable reality of *Fortress Europe*: Europe is becoming, day after day, a farther destination, almost impossible to reach due to the strict controls and illegal pushbacks occurring at the EU's external borders (Amnesty International, 2019).

The Balkan Route became the main way to reach Europe after March 2016, when the European Union and Turkey signed a bilateral agreement, closing what had been for years the main channel through which refugees and migrants attempted to get to Continental Europe; at that point 60 000 migrants and refugees found themselves stuck in Balkan countries. However, as history teaches, if one channel closes others may open, and the Balkan Route soon became the dangerous alternative (Astuti et al., 2021). Bosnia and Herzegovina became a part of the Balkan Route, the last non-EU transit country before the “final destination”, only in 2018 as a consequence of, on one side, the increasing difficulties in crossing the border between Serbia and Croatia and,

on the other side, the increasing difficulties in seeking asylum in Hungary. As the data show, the number of people who transited through Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2017 was only 1.116; in 2018 it was 23.848, and in 2020 around 70.000 people transited through the country with the intention to cross the border with Croatia¹. At the moment, around 3.190 refugees and migrants are stranded in Bosnia and Herzegovina².

However, it is in Bosnia and Herzegovina that things get complicated: migrants and refugees who try to cross Europe's external border are met with strict control methods by the Croatian police, who often resorts to violence and illegal pushbacks to send them back to refugee camps in Bosnia (Astuti et al., 2021). The problematic outcome is that these people end up staying in reception centers for longer than they intend to, waiting for a new opportunity to try to cross the border, but the chances of succeeding remain low.

"*The Game*" is how refugees and migrants call the attempt to cross the border with Croatia, which sounds dramatically ironic considering that the Croatian police often beats, abuses and robs them before illegally pushing them back to Bosnia and Herzegovina, abandoning them in dark and unknown streets where they easily get lost with no food or water (Amnesty International, 2019). Despite being illegal, these methods are frequent: between July and November 2021, around 4900 people have been violently pushed back by the Croatian police; without a real response from the European Union, which remains motionless in front of these severe violations of human rights (Clementi et al., 2021, p. 25). Therefore, within the Balkan Route, Croatia functions as Europe's main *Gate Keeper*: it strictly protects the EU's external border by keeping migrants and refugees outside of its territory, in non-EU transit countries where they end up spending long periods in precarious conditions, waiting for another chance to try "the Game" (Amnesty International, 2019).

Bosnia Herzegovina in the Balkan Route

In a few years, Bosnia and Herzegovina was put in front of a double challenge: an increasing number of migrants and refugees transiting through the country in the attempt to get to Europe, but who might be stuck there for long periods due to the strict controls and illegal pushbacks at the Croatian border. Thus, Bosnia and Herzegovina soon became one of the most important transit countries on the Balkan Route, where thousands of migrants and refugees are "trapped" for several weeks or even months.

However, Bosnia and Herzegovina was not prepared for what was coming and it soon became clear that it was not able to provide an effective solution for its own people or the migrants and refugees, because it is a poor and fragile country, fragmented internally due to an *endless conflict*, with high levels of corruption and a problematic inefficiency of the tripartite government (Brambilla et al., 2021). It was in this unprepared, chaotic, and disorganized context that the IOM³ was put in charge, substituting the local government, of the reception system of the country. The main task of the IOM has been, since the summer of 2018, the management of the UN funds in order to provide a more efficient solution to the complex scenario that resulted from the EU's migration policies (Astuti et al., 2021). The IOM's main strategy in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been to open the so-called *Temporary Reception Centers* (TRC) across the country: refugee camps where

¹ Astuti et al., 2021, p. 22.

² IOM, 2022, p.1.

³ International Organization for Migration

migrants are placed waiting for a new chance to try the “the Game”. More precisely, two camps were opened in 2018 (one in the Canton of Una-Sana and one in Ušivak); in 2019, another TRC was inaugurated in Blažuj and finally, in 2020 the center of Lipa was built in the homonymous upland, 30 km away from the closest city of Bihać (Clementi et al., 2021). Nevertheless, these Temporary Reception Centers present different problems. To begin with, they are isolated and heavily controlled camps where living conditions remain poor: they easily end up being overcrowded, dirty, and unsafe places. Furthermore, TRCs have been projected to be a temporary solution where migrants can stop during their trip to Europe, but in reality – due to the controls and the pushbacks at the border – migrants and refugees might be stuck there for long periods. Their stay in Bosnia is made even more difficult by the government’s strict policies: migrants and refugees are prohibited from accessing several public facilities including shops, supermarkets, and bars; and since 2020 they are prohibited from taking public transportation (Astuti et al., 2021).

Lipa

Lipa is a part of this IOM’s strategy: it is a Temporary Reception Center for single men situated in the upland of Lipa at 800 m of elevation, 2 km from the closest highway and 30 km from the closest city of Bihać. The considerable distance from Bihać is undoubtedly a problem as it means being far away from fundamental facilities such as hospitals, stations, supermarkets... However, the isolated location is not a simple coincidence, but more of a thought-out choice: relegate migrants and refugees to an isolated and marginalized area, far from the local people so as to avoid tensions and problems (Clementi et al., 2021).

Lipa’s maximum capacity is 1500 beds, but at the moment around 700 beds are occupied. Migrants and refugees in Lipa come from Afghanistan (57%), Burundi (27%), Pakistan (4%), Iran (2%), and Cuba (2%)⁴. The camp of Lipa was first opened on April 21st, 2020 as a part of the Bosnian government’s Covid-19 measures: it was built with the intention to host over 1000 migrants and refugees who had no other place to stay besides illegal accommodations, and thus to avoid the spread of the virus. However, the problems of the camp soon became evident: it was opened before being ready, un-equipped, with no water connection and limited availability of electricity. Hence, it was clear since the beginning that Lipa was a problematic center where hundreds of people were forced to live in inhuman and degrading conditions. The IOM became aware of the unbearable conditions and decided to officially abandon the camp on December 23rd, 2020, despite there was not yet a real alternative for all people living there (*ibidem*, 2021). Right after the IOM’s announcement, a massive fire broke out in the camp, destroying everything and leaving migrants and refugees with nowhere else to go (Brambilla, 2021). The fire and the following events generated a strong resentment amongst the international public opinion, especially towards the solution provided by the Bosnian government. Between December 2020 and November 2021, the Bosnian army set up, on the ruins of the previous camp, a temporary camp of tents aimed at hosting a maximum of 900 people without a real improvement of the living conditions, which remained unbearable considering the limited availability of food (only one meal per day) and the unavailability of clean water and doctors (Camilli, 2021). In spring 2021, the IOM and the Bosnian government

⁴ IOM, 2022, p. 1

started to collaborate on the construction of a new reception center in the same exact location as before. This may sound like a contradiction: the same place that a few months earlier was considered inhumane was now portrayed, by the IOM in the first place, as a necessary and valuable solution to prevent hundreds of migrants and refugees from settling in illegal and dangerous accommodation (Brambilla et al., 2021). On November 19th, 2021, the new Temporary Reception Center of Lipa was re-open with unquestionable improvements: the new camp was provided with new housing units with electricity and heating systems; clothes, shelter, and food are provided by the camp, as well as sanitation and medical care (Clementi et al., 2021). Since November 2021, the IOM has managed the camp with the support of different NGOs like IPSIA-Acli, which has introduced different social activities, such as the Social Cafe: a place where migrants and refugees can socialize and engage in simple activities like board games and English lessons.

Some problems remain

Despite the unquestionable improvements, Lipa remains a problematic reality of the Balkan Route for three reasons. To begin with, the TRC remains situated in an isolated location, entirely detached from any other “normal” social context and without a real possibility for migrants and refugees to establish any sort of interaction outside of the camp (Clementi et al., 2021). This makes Lipa an alienate place, a “*non-place*” that inevitably leads to segregation, violence, and marginality (Brambilla et al., 2021). Furthermore, Lipa represents the inability of both the Bosnian government and the EU’s institutions to find an alternative solution that is not the confinement of migrants and refugees in isolated facilities, which in the end seem to be detention centers rather than reception camps where migrants are only meant to transit (Clementi et al., 2021). Finally, Lipa is a perfectly acceptable solution for temporary stays but rather problematic for longer periods. However, this conflicts with the fact that the majority of migrants and refugees end up staying for several weeks or even months as a direct consequence of the controls and the pushbacks at the border with Croatia. Hence, Lipa ends up being the exact opposite of a “temporary” and “transit” camp: an isolated place where hundreds of migrants and refugees are confined for an undefined period waiting for a new chance to try “the Game” (Clementi et al., 2021). In fact, as shown by the IOM, the average length of stay in Lipa is around 28 days, compared to other camps in the country where the average length of stay does not surpass 11 days⁵.

Conclusion

This essay presented the complex and problematic reality of the Balkan Route and of the Temporary Reception Center across Bosnia and Herzegovina. The paper focused on the TRC of Lipa, a refugee camp for single men located in the homonymous upland, which, among all the other reception centers across the country, presents severe controversies and remains the most discussed one. As a matter of fact, Lipa shows how the strategy of the IOM, considering the interests of the Bosnian government, remains the confinement of refugees and migrants in isolated facilities where they can be easily controlled and kept away from the sight of the local population.

⁵ (IOM, 2022, p.1).

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