

Refugee solidarity along the Western Balkans route: new challenges and a change of strategy in times of COVID-19

Chiara Milan (11th May 2020)

Lockdown and restrictions to people's movement in the Western Balkans

Just as the COVID-19 pandemic has presented several opportunities for strongmen in the Western Balkans region to grab extra powers, it has also made solidarity initiatives with people in transit along the Western Balkans route more difficult. The route has been declared officially closed in March 2016 by virtue of the (controversial) agreement between the EU and Turkey.

Nevertheless, the migratory flow has never stopped. People escaping war and poverty continued in their attempts to cross the region to reach Northern Europe, although their journey became increasingly dangerous and risky. With the progressive closure of borders and the recent restrictions to people's movement, also the living conditions of those stranded in the refugee centers in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) have dramatically worsened.

On March 15th, Serbia declared the state of emergency to prevent the spread of coronavirus. After almost two months, on May 7th the state of emergency has been lifted for everyone but the 9,000 individuals living in the state-run refugee centers throughout the country. The Serbian lockdown, one of the stricter in Europe, imposed the closing of the doors of 19 asylum and reception centres across the country. The people held inside cannot longer leave or enter them except for exceptional circumstances, such as medical reasons. Meanwhile, the army and security forces caught all those found sleeping rough or in improvised shelters in cities and rural areas of Serbia and forcibly transferred them inside the official centres. These centres are now overcrowded, making it impossible to comply with the necessary social distancing rules. Prevented to leave the centres, migrants are put in a state of "permanent quarantine". They cannot go out to buy goods, clothes, or the food necessary to integrate the small portions distributed daily. This situation makes also almost impossible to withdraw the money sent from their families via Western Union, needed for the daily survival and to pay smugglers.

The migrants stuck in Bosnia and Herzegovina face a similar destiny. Since the beginning of 2018, the country has turned into the bottleneck of the Western Balkans migratory route. Nowadays about 5,500 persons find themselves inside the nine reception centers of the country, while an estimated figure of 2,000 found shelter in makeshift camps in the middle of woods, abandoned warehouses or buildings in ruin close to the Croatian border. Unlike Serbia, where the camps are managed by domestic authorities, the majority of centers in Bosnia and Herzegovina are run by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The IOM entrusted the surveillance of the centers to private

companies, and repeatedly cases of violence of private surveillance guards against migrants have been reported ever since.

After the proclamation of the state of emergency on March 28th, Bosnian and Herzegovinian authorities have progressively curb the movement of their citizens, extending these restrictions to migrants. Foreigners are prohibited from entering BiH as part of the measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus. On April 17, the Council of Ministers of BiH announced that any foreigner found without a valid document and a residence address, registered at the foreign office, will be automatically deported to the reception centres, where (s)he will must stay with no possibility of getting out. As in Serbia, also in BiH migrants and asylum seekers have been forcibly transferred to refugee centres, which are overcrowded, often with no access to hot water and laundry services. Not even soap is provided to wash clothes and hands. In a situation in which even stricter hygienic sanitary standards are to be followed, in the centres not even basic hygienic conditions can be respected. Amongst deprivation, movement bans, and closed borders, people on the move appear even more isolated and vulnerable than before the pandemic. Inside the centres cases of fights amongst individuals are repeatedly reported, while depression is dramatically increasing.

Refugee solidarity along the Western Balkans route does not stop

However, this situation has not stopped international and local volunteers from acting in solidarity with people in transit along the Western Balkans route. Notwithstanding the enforcement of lockdowns and movement bans forced the majority of international volunteers to leave the region, the attempts to provide some relief to migrants have continued, just the strategy had to be changed. If in normal times support to asylum seekers proved to be a difficult task, in times of pandemic it is even more so for different reasons. First of all, the prohibition to be physically present. With the outbreak of the COVID-19, the access to official refugee centres has been restricted to few authorized organizations, usually large international associations such as the Red Cross. Informal, independent grassroots groups are banned from accessing them, and also can no longer provide assistance to those living outside the centres. The physical presence is of utmost importance for the volunteers of No Name Kitchen (NNK), an independent organization that gathers international volunteers providing hot meals and first-aid support to undocumented migrants along the Western Balkans route. In Serbia since 2017, they have been kicked out of the country following the state's emergency declaration.

Unable to provide hot meals and human support by visiting migrants in squats and makeshift camps, the volunteers of NKK had to suspend their activities on the ground. However, they have decided to remain by changing strategy. "If we cannot reach out to people to provide them with food, we can still bring people to food", claimed a volunteer. NKK has thus opted for distributing online vouchers that migrants can exchange in edible goods at local shops and

bakeries, with which NNK has previously been in contact. By means of this “solidarity market”, NKK manages both to provide food for around 500 people weekly and to support the local economy. A practice followed also by other grassroots collectives, such as the Italian Bozen Solidarity, which uses social networks to provide people on the move in BiH with coupons that they can spend in markets of Bihać and Velika Kladuša, two important nodes of the migratory path.

Yet the Western Balkans route does not cross only the former Yugoslav region. The city of Trieste, in Italy, has turned into the landing place of the route. Here relentless women and men of the Linea d’ombra association (literally “Shadow line”) have never stopped providing firsthand support the migrants who manage to reach the Italian territory after having been beaten up by the Croatian police at the border. The 30-50 migrants reaching Trieste daily come with broken arms, infected wounds, and often barefoot. “At times around 100 people showed up in a day”, explained the founder of the association, “we kept healing their wounds even when local authorities revoked the authorization to provide assistance to migrants on the open space, and we were asked to hide in a less visible spot”. Volunteer doctors of the association La Strada Si.Cura (The safe road/The road must be cured) provide migrants with healthcare, while continuing to operate also along the Slovenian border.

Illegal pushbacks continue even during the pandemic, although the changed situation makes it more difficult to report them. The group Border Violence Monitoring, which gathers several individuals and associations active along the route, has been constantly monitoring pushbacks, collecting and reporting episodes of police violence committed against migrants at the borders. With the borders closed and people locked inside their houses, those experiencing violence at the border and discriminatory treatment, mostly committed by the Croatian police, are given the possibility to send their testimonies in a safe manner by means of social networks.

The pandemic intensified also the efforts to join hands amongst the several independent solidarity groups active along the route. To denounce the unhealthy and unsafe conditions of the official reception centres for migrants and refugees, especially those managed by the IOM across BiH, the recently founded Transbalkan Solidarity Network launched the campaign “A soap for IOM”. The 48-hour campaign, called “Soap bombing”, denounced the mismanagement of the centres IOM run in BiH. Here, most often migrants lack the most basic hygienic supplies, even more necessary in time of pandemic. The network also wrote the open letter “CoVID-19: No one is safe until All are protected!” to raise awareness on the worsening conditions of people in transit along the route, calling for the end of discriminatory and dehumanizing practices against migrants, demanding to stop the violence at the borders, and advocating for the provision of basic sanitary conditions and healthcare to people on the move. Formed in March 2020, the network gathers hundreds of activists from all over the region (North Macedonia, Serbia, BiH, Croatia,

Slovenia, Italy), striving to respond to the immobility of institutions as regards the situation of the most vulnerable under the pandemic, the migrants.

The militarization of borders and criminalization of solidarity

The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the conditions of people on the move, stigmatized, segregated and discriminated even more than before. In the pandemic, local governments have found a justification to further restrict freedom of movement and enact the militarization of borders. In the same line of EU leaders, also Western Balkans officials have changed the narrative towards people on the move. While the first waves arrived in summer 2015, local politicians showed a welcoming attitude towards them, motivated with a discourse portraying the Western Balkans as “merely transit countries”. Following the closure of the route, and the EU process of externalization of the borders, local politicians changed their public discourse to depict migrants as dangerous individuals, criminals and terrorists willing to stay in the country. With the arrival of the pandemic, migrants are also accused of spreading the virus. Although the data prove that the region remains a place of transit, since a very little number of individuals files asylum claims, the attitude towards people on the move has changed. Along similar lines, police violence at the borders, as well as attacks of right-wing and nationalist groups refugees and volunteers are on the rise. The change of narrative criminalizes not only migrants, but also those acting in solidarity with them. Lately, the animosity against migrants and international volunteers increased in particular in Šid, at the northern border with Hungary, to the extent that at the end of February some volunteers have been physically attacked by right-wing extremists, acting in cahoots with the local police. As volunteers provide free support mainly to people who have not access to, or refuse to enter, official refugee centres, they have been accused of being a pull factor attracting migrants to the country. This narrative has been widely used previously against NGOs rescuing migrants on the Mediterranean sea, and mirrors the negative attitude towards migrants endorsed by local politicians. Government and often the local population alike accuse pro-refugee solidarity groups to be a pull factor attracting people in transit, while they are just (and consciously) filling a void left by local institutions and large international organizations. This results in people in transit being increasingly invisibilized, pushed at the outskirts of cities and deported in refugee centres that they cannot live anymore. Besides the militarization of borders, nowadays we are assisting at the militarization of refugee centers, which have converted from transit to detention centres, some of them being fenced overnight. In the meantime, the possibility to file an asylum claim is de facto denied.

In times of pandemic, the declaration of the state of emergency has been used to reinforce the negative attitude towards migrants and marginalize them even further. By contrast, pro-refugee solidarity groups are striving to counter this process of dehumanization and marginalization finding innovative ways to alleviate the hardship migrants are facing, like for instance by means of the

above-mentioned “solidarity markets”. In the meantime, their appeals to grant migrants rights and healthcare have intensified.

About the author

Chiara Milan is Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow at the Centre for Southeast European Studies of the University of Graz (Austria). Her research deals with social movements, citizenship, nationalism and migration. She is the author of *Social mobilization beyond ethnicity. Grassroots movements and civic activism in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (2020, Routledge). Her twitter is @ChiaraNalim and email chiara.milan AT uni-graz.at