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‘Refugee Crisis’ in the South-East European Countries: the rise and fall of the Balkan corridor

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the asylum policies and measures in the South-East European countries that formed an essential part of the migration corridor during the recent mass-arrivals of refugees and other migrants travelling towards Germany, Sweden and other countries in Western Europe. It is argued that an important aspect of how transit countries dealt with the influx of migrants was shaped by a concern to avoid becoming a migrant hotspot. This seemed more important to the authorities than concerns about refugees’ access to protection systems and integration into local communities. Such notions have been especially fostered within the area commonly referred to as the Balkan corridor, which emerged as a semi-formalised route of safe passage for the massive transit of refugees and migrants, which lasted from spring 2015 to spring 2016. The idiosyncratic posturing of the countries in the region enabled more than one million people to trespass on Balkan sovereign states in a swift and, at times, overtly controlled and organised manner.

However, data and statistics concerning the numbers of refugees and migrants in transit over South-East Europe has been imprecise due to the massive numbers involved in terms of migrant flows, and the ill-prepared state actors responsible for the management of official statistical facilities. There were frequent instances of omitting the migrants’ registration deliberately. Yet, in spite of the lack of rigor applied, in terms of the reliability of the statistics, it is abundantly clear that the majority of asylum seekers that applied for asylum in Europe, during the above-mentioned period, did travel through the Western Balkan area.¹

In the following pages, we discuss several research questions, namely: i) What were the responses at state level in the Balkan countries regarding recent migratory flows? ii) What were the structural frames that influenced the responses and the local constructions of “the crisis”? iii) How were the mass-migrations interpreted and constructed at the local and the regional levels? iv) What kind of relationships were established between local authorities, NGOs and civic society in the process of accommodating, assisting and organising further transit?

This chapter is divided into several interrelated parts. In the first part, we contextualize the emergence of the corridor and discuss how various countries in the region responded to the mass arrivals. Thereafter, we analyse the local constructions of “the crisis” and the relationships between the authorities and the NGOs. Here, we focus primarily on the Croatian experience. Finally, we examine the closure of the corridor and further securitization measures that followed. Discussion is based on the findings of a research project, conducted over a three-year period (2014-7). In 2014 and 2015, the focus was on conducting in-depth interviews with asylum seekers and refugees in Croatia, investigating their agency, and the reasons why they

¹ However, due to the large numbers of arriving refugees, some “EU official statistics” may, in some cases, have inadvertently, misrepresented the numbers of arrivals. Sigona (2015) pointed to the fact that FRONTEX, in its statistical exercise, counted multiple entries for migrants, by including each border they had crossed or attempted to cross, into the territories of EU member states. Thus, a transit of an individual person may be somewhat multiplied which, retroactively, influenced the media’s portrayal of the “mass-arrivals”, and framed - by political rhetoric - as the “crisis of the EU (Schengen) border protection” and/or the “crisis of the Common European Asylum System”, among other constructions of “crisis” (see de Genova and Tazzioli 2016, 7-15).

chose Croatia as a country of transit, and yet avoided it as the final destination country (see Valenta, Župarić-Iljić and Vidović 2015). Later on, during 2016 and 2017, our research focus shifted to that of examining the institutional responses of relevant authorities and NGOs in the region to mass-arrivals of refugees. This was conducted by means of expert interviews and documenting participant observations, as experienced within the transit reception centre camps and at border points along Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia.

RESPONSES ON THE MASS ARRIVALS ALONG THE BALKAN CORRIDOR

In forced migration literature, a specific framing of “migration as crisis” (“migration crisis”) refers to situations of:

“complex, often large-scale migration flows caused by a crisis which, typically, involves significant attendant vulnerabilities for affected individuals and communities. A migration crisis may be i) sudden or of slow-onset, ii) have natural or manmade causes, iii) take place internally or across borders” (IOM, 2012, 1).

Therefore, “migration crisis”, as such, is understood as a consequence of “a crisis”, rather than its cause. Likewise, to conceptualise “crisis migration” requires a term which is politically, administratively, and socio-culturally constructed. Jane McAdam (2014, 29-31) understands “crisis migration” as mobility related to any crisis situation, whereby such circumstances, defined as exceptional and extraordinary, seek immediate measures and emergency solutions. Several of the above mentioned elements have characterised the mass arrivals of migrants in Balkan countries in 2015-6. However, some authors understand the events of the Balkan corridor not as a refugee/migration crisis *per se*, but as a specific type of politically and socio-culturally constructed, conveyed and perpetuated discourse on crisis (de Genova and Tazzioli 2016, 15-21).

In order to contextualise the discussion on responses and constructions of the crisis, we also need to stress some of the relevant historical and socio-economic factors that have framed the responses to a recent mass-migration occurrence in the region. Firstly, it is important to remember that several countries in the region experienced recent armed conflict and refugee movements of their own populations. Displacement of more than four million people, as a result of war atrocities following the dissolution Yugoslavia in the 1990s, created multiple local and regional solutions for protracted refugee and internal-displacement status in the Balkans.

The disintegration of Yugoslavia and the wars that followed resulted in large refugee flows from the region to the receiving countries in Europe (Black and Koser 1999; Valenta and Strabac 2013). During the 1990s, the largest receiving countries outside the region were Germany, Austria and Sweden.² In addition, several West Balkan countries received large numbers of internally displaced people. Most countries in the region were also destinations for hundreds of thousands migrants and refugees from other Yugoslavian republics (Ramet and Valenta 2016). Serbia received Serbian forced migrants and refugees from Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo, while Croatia received the Croatian displaced population and refugees from Bosnia and Northern Serbia.³ Croatia alone had, in 1992, 800.000 refugees and IDPs. Therefore,

² Large numbers of these migrants and refugees resided permanently in Austria and Sweden and other destination countries in Western Europe, and in the region. Others were expelled or they returned voluntarily after the war ended in their countries. Large numbers of Kosovars were returned and majority of Bosnian refugees who in early 1990s got temporary reception in Germany were returned after the war in the country ended (Black and Koser 1999; Valenta and Ramet 2011).

providing shelter, humanitarian aid and repatriation support to IDPs and refugees has, for a number of years, remained one of the crucial humanitarian and socio-political tasks for Croatia, as well as for several other countries in South-East Europe, primarily, Serbia, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Lukić and Nikitović 2004; Mesić and Bagić 2011; Valenta and Ramet 2011; Ramet and Valenta 2016). Thus, experiences of displacement, both for local authorities and local populations should be taken into consideration when we discuss the reactions of local people to the recent mass arrivals that took place in 2015 and 2016. Throughout the whole region, the responses of the local populations and NGOs were often related to their own experiences of conflict and displacement and, also, in dealing with refugee populations back in the 1990s. In Croatia, some of the most affected areas during the conflict, which also generated the largest refugee flows, were the same areas that experienced mass arrivals of transit migrants in 2015 and 2016.

Secondly, individual countries' policy positions in the EU, and their relations with the EU, should be taken into consideration. Greece, Hungary and Slovenia are both part of the Schengen zone, and also part of the Dublin system of cooperation. In the case of EU countries Croatia and Bulgaria, they have also adopted the Dublin Regulation, but they are not part of the Schengen zone. Yet other countries in the region (such as Macedonia and Serbia) are not in the EU and, thus, are not part of the same cooperation dynamics. Nevertheless, the dynamics of developing their own asylum, migration and border management systems in most Balkan countries were driven mainly by their progression towards trying to achieve EU accession (Lalić Novak 2016; Stojić Mitrović 2014). Croatia became a member in July 2013, while accession progress for Serbia, Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina is hindered by various political and administrative impediments.

A third factor relates to the arrival of catastrophic floods in Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia during May 2014. The resultant huge material damage brought about a sort of "crisis migration" response where relevant authorities and NGOs were rapidly mobilised into helping temporarily displaced populations (Župarić-Iljić 2017). During and after this natural disaster, the crisis management response was one of evacuate, shelter, return of affected populations. Later, when the mass migrations from Syria and other countries started to arrive in the above-mentioned countries in 2015, some of the recent experiences and tools, which had been utilised during the earlier floods, were promptly deployed to manage the mass-arrivals of migrants.

Finally, we should take into account the fact that, without exception, the Southeast European states have weak economies and suffer from high levels of unemployment which, for a number of years, has generated substantial emigration flows, primarily to Western Europe. For example, Serbia in particular, is a state whose citizens form sizable share of asylum seekers in EU countries (Grupković et al. 2016, 16-20). In the case of Croatia, tens of thousands of its citizens became labour migrants in other EU countries. Joining the EU gave Croatians access to its labour markets. The economic recession and high unemployment levels in Croatia generated the largest, single, emigration wave towards Western Europe since the armed conflicts of the 1990s (Jutarnji list 2017). Within this context, it is not surprising that the West Balkan countries—and refugees and migrants in transit—were in tacit agreement that such countries could not be regarded, as destination countries. Indeed, the analysis of the mass-arrivals in 2015-16 should also take into account migrants' agency and how they position themselves vis-à-vis the European migration system, and its different sub-elements. In this system, the EU countries at the South-eastern borders of the EU are usually considered as transit countries and a least desired final destination for migrants making their way towards

³ In addition, in the early 1990s, Slovenia received tens of thousands of refugees from Bosnia while, in the late 1990s, Macedonia received several hundred thousand refugees from Kosovo (Valenta and Ramet 2011; Donev, Onceva and Gligorov 2002).

large asylum destination countries in the Schengen area, with more developed reception conditions and better integration opportunities.

Several of the aforementioned structural factors need to be taken in account in any analysis of the local constructions of crisis and how West-Balkan countries responded to the mass-migrations of 2015-6, which also resulted in the rise and fall of Balkan corridor.⁴

The rise of the Balkan corridor

The disintegration of Yugoslavia, the wars and the migrations, within and from the region, have attracted much attention, from both politicians and researchers (Black and Koser 1999; Lukić and Nikitović 2004; Mesić and Bagić 2011; Valenta and Strabac 2013). Yet, transit migrations in the region that took place in the post-conflict period attracted little attention (Papadopoulou 2004; Valenta et al 2015; Lukić 2016). In the last decade, irregular migrations to Europe have, primarily, been associated with the transit migrations via Libya and the central Mediterranean region.⁵ However, the topic of transit migrations, via Libya and the central Mediterranean region, was not at the forefront of debate in 2015 as the focus of media and politicians changed with the rise of the Balkan corridor. In 2015, the vast majority of migrants entering Europe went through the Balkan corridor, and the sufferings of those migrants, stranded at the borders, or transiting the region, started to dominate the debates.

These separate and unrelated outbreaks of political and social upheaval, leading to mass migrations, were fused together under the same shorthand label of “the refugee crisis” in Europe. The situation escalated in the summer of 2015 with mass-arrivals of migrants from Turkey to the Greek islands. Thereafter, hundreds of thousands of those migrants continued further onwards, towards Western Europe via Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, Croatia and Slovenia. It is maintained that this phenomenon was the product of a combination of different push-forces, such as political instability and wars in Syria, and elsewhere, such as in Iraq, Afghanistan, Eritrea (Fargues and Fandrich 2012; Heisbourg 2015). But it is also clear that an important factor shaping “the crisis” was the array of various idiosyncratic responses from both transit and receiving countries in Europe. Prior to the mass-arrivals in 2015, countries bordering the Union had applied, for many years, a set of established externalising asylum policies, border protection and deterrence measures in order to reduce numbers of irregular migrants and asylum seekers. Several states in the south and south-eastern regions of Europe have, for some years, engaged in cooperation with their neighbours regarding the prevention of irregular migrations, before migrants in transit can reach their borders, while also serving as “buffer-zones” for the rest of the core EU countries (Boswell, 2003). Another part of the externalisation of border control and asylum policy has been the readmission agreements between the EU and its neighbours, such as, the Western Balkans, Turkey, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova. Countries lying on the borders of the Union have also, at times, reached bilateral readmission

⁴ There are several other factors that may influence the responses of the countries in the region such as differences in the political orientations of local political elites. For example, in Croatia, the Social-Democrats were in power during the time of the mass-arrivals. In contrast, Hungary had a right-wing-oriented government led by Viktor Orban. This difference in political orientation influenced the way in which each country dealt with the influx of migrants. Furthermore, a lack of willingness to provide more permanent protection to the migrants may also be related to general attitudes towards immigrants within the regions

⁵ Such a large interest in the transit migrations via Libya and the central Mediterranean region may be related to at least two factors. First, prior to 2015, transit migrations via Libya and the central Mediterranean route were, indeed, of a considerably larger scale than those that went through the Balkans. Second, transit migrations through Libya and the central Mediterranean region raised large media attention, as this route was, by far, the most dangerous migrant route into Europe. As a result, the debates on irregular migrations into Europe were dominated by media images of drownings in the Mediterranean Sea and reports on trafficking, exploitative practices and slavery-like experiences of migrants who transited through Libya and its neighbouring countries.

agreements such as those between Greece with Turkey, Spain with Morocco and Italy with Libya. In addition to these measures, several countries bordering EU territories have, at times, prevented migrants and refugees from reaching their destination country, either by intercepting them at sea or by various deterrence and pushback practices (Triandafyllidou and Dimitriadi 2014).

However, in 2015, the Balkan countries unexpectedly stopped serving as “buffer-zones” for the rest of the core EU countries, complying to the fact that Germany and Sweden had previously declared they would grant protection to Syrian asylum seekers reaching these two countries. The Balkan countries also maintained that they were not “wished for” final destinations, while Germany, Sweden and other West European countries were wanted destinations by refugees themselves. Consequently, the Balkan territories defined themselves as transit countries, while, at the same time, engaging in the zero-sum game where each country along the Balkan corridor, overtly or covertly, avoided becoming a long-term receiver of asylum seekers. This was the main practice, with different countries reacting in different ways to the growing arrival of migrants, some opening their borders with a focus on short-term humanitarian aid, but with the overall aim of securitised and swift transit to the next country in the migration chain. Additionally, other countries also attempted to deflect migrants from their territories by building wire barriers, razor-fences and sending a military presence to protect their borders (i.e. Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Hungary).

Hungary was the most sought after as transit country since it was part of the Schengen Zone (FRONTEX 2015). Migrants who managed to evade Hungarian border patrols and cross the border between Serbia and Hungary undetected, were able to continue to their target destination countries in the EU without facing new border controls. In early 2015, the major response to the mass-arrivals in the region was to allow and tolerate non-assisted transit through their countries, such as in case of Serbia and Macedonia. In the first stages of arrivals, Hungary and most countries in the region oscillated between closing and reopening the borders, indeterminately tolerating transit to the West. When Hungary completed the construction of a barbed wire fence in September 2015 and closed the international border-crossings with Serbia, refugees and other forced migrants turned towards Croatia, trying to enter the Schengen Zone via Croatia through Hungary and later on through Slovenia. The response of Slovenia was to erect barbed wire fencing along its border with Croatia. In order to deflect migrants transiting via Greece, Macedonia also militarised its border with Greece and erected a barbed wire fence.

In autumn 2015, regular reception centres for accommodation of asylum seekers soon became very full. In response, Serbian, Croatian and Slovenian governments opened several “transit reception centres” along the corridor, hosting thousands of people in transit. Croatia and Slovenia continued with overtly assisted transit of migrants through their territories, regulating the pace of their movement by halting them in reception centres in which short-term accommodation and assistance was provided (Kogovšek Šalamon 2016; Greider 2017; Šelo Šabić 2017).

The situation in southern parts of the corridor, which received the largest percentage of transiting migrants, was far worse. It resulted in overcrowded and poor conditions in reception camps and centres on Greek islands, and in centres close to the Greek-Macedonian and the Macedonian-Serbian borders. Due to insufficient state assistance, thousands of migrants were faced with inhumane living conditions - surviving in makeshift shanty towns that sprang up on the outskirts of the big cities (Lukić 2016). However, the majority of people stayed there only for short periods of time as the hasty transit of refugees was tolerated by the local authorities and carried out either in a self-organised or smuggling-assisted manner (like in Macedonia and—in part—Serbia) or by means of state-controlled and assisted ways, as in Croatia and Slovenia. This tolerated and overtly secured transit had reduced the sufferings of migrants

along the Balkan corridor. It also lowered the human and economic costs of migration, but increased the pressure on the destination countries in the Western Europe.

In sum, initial responses by all countries along the Balkan corridor in 2015 shared several similar features. Firstly, they were characterised by the application of *ad hoc* solutions in response to specific situations or perceived problems arising from developments on the ground. They formed part of an emergency and exceptional measures response, manifested through over displays of surveillance measures and physical deterrents. Another similarity that all countries along the Balkan corridor shared, when compared with receiving countries in Western Europe, was that they met arriving migrants with insufficient protection systems characterised by low and inadequate reception standards, high rejection rates for claimants, and few integration opportunities for refugees who were granted protection (Coleridge 2013; Valenta et al. 2015; Greider 2017; Porobić and Župarić-Iljić 2017). Even so, we identified evident differences between the countries' positioning in regard to "crisis management" strategies. Macedonia and Serbia, authorities issued 72 hour temporary permit and tolerated transit through their countries, but refugees, after exiting registration and reception centres, were left to find their own ways and means of how best to travel across the country to the next border. In the case of Croatia and Slovenia, state budgets had been purchased as a matter of formal policy so that strict control could be exercised in terms of their entering and transiting through countries. At the same time, refugees' minimal stay in transit reception centres, in both countries, has mainly been carried out in a highly excluding, isolating and segregating manner.

Rhetoric and the social constructions of the crisis also diverged at the peak of the mass-arrivals. Probably, the major difference was that Serbian and Croatian authorities alike, promoted a quite different approach to mass-arrivals in comparison with other West Balkan countries. According to Šelo Šabić and Borić, who provided an extensive overview of the local responses to the migrant influx in the region, the views of participants in Serbian public debates were predominantly empathetic towards migrants, with particular reference to human solidarity, the humanitarian aspect of the migrations, and Serbians own experiences of displacement from the wars in former Yugoslavia. The authors also argued that among all the Western Balkan countries explored in their report, 'the Serbian government has conveyed the most positive discourse on the arriving migrants (Šelo Šabić and Borić 2016, 10).⁶

Both Serbian and Croatian authorities maintained that their responses were humane and humanitarian, and in strong opposition to the strategies of those countries that decided to "defend" their borders with walls and razor-fences (i.e. Macedonia, Bulgaria, Slovenia, and Hungary).⁷ In contrast, the Hungarian rightist government, headed by Viktor Orban, took the harshest stance against arriving migrants. Compared with Croatia and Serbia, Hungarian political elites used overtly xenophobic rhetoric. Also, in Slovenia, political elites were more concerned to close off the borders and, to this end, decided to build fences. The Slovenian government placed a constant emphasis on their role as protector of Schengen's external borders and related security aspects, which resulted in growing public fear and discomfort (Kogovšek Šalamon and Bajt 2016). These kinds of attitudes and resort to rhetoric in Hungary, Slovenia and, subsequently, also in several other countries in the region, led to further securitisation of state responses in the form of "state of emergency", and "state of exception" measures. This consequently led to further militarisation and securitisation of asylum,

⁶ Šelo Šabić and Borić (2016) link the positive stance of the Serbian authorities with Serbia's negotiations with the EU, and Serbia's candidate status regarding future EU membership. Accordingly, Serbia's authorities did their best to appear as a responsible, constructive, key partner to the EU.

⁷ On the official daily reports on arrivals, reception, accommodation and transit of refugees in Croatia, see MoI (2015) and MoI (2016). Also, for the initial response of the Croatian state and civil actors to the massive arrivals of refugees see Čapo (2015) and Šelo Šabić and Borić (2016).

migration and border management policies, as well as the criminalisation and irregularisation of forced migrants' movements.

CONSTRUCTIONS OF “THE CRISIS” IN CROATIA: “YOU ARE WELCOME, BUT TRAVEL ON”

At the very peak of mass-arrivals in in the fall of 2015, we had the best opportunity to closely follow the public discourse and responses of authorities in Croatia. Indeed, Croatian society accepted the massive arrivals of refugees by expressing largely positive, humanitarian attitudes, both at the level of the Government's representatives, that of the public, and of civil organisations. A welcoming atmosphere on the part of the public has been clearly noted amongst local citizens living in the Croatian post-war areas where refugees entered the country and where, later on, the first transit reception centre was located. On the other hand, the way of placing people in closed facilities of transit reception camps, and then executing a highly controlled and managed transportation to the next border, in reality removed any possibility for the majority of the local population to come into direct contact with the refugees, as opposed to seeing them featured in media reporting. Those extraordinary reception centres were organised as short-term humanitarian camps, and run jointly by police forces, local and international humanitarian actors, volunteers and refugee-rights civil actors, utilising intertwined humanitarian and securitarian “crisis management” practices.

Several factors might have influenced the official responses and discourses, inter alia, how they have been shaped and reshaped by Croatian political turmoil in the parliamentary pre-election time and, secondly, through episodes of friction with neighbouring states that were affected via the Croatian authorities' balancing between the national political and economic interests' and pressures from the European Commission. Until November 2015, the main focus on practical challenges such as to organise reception for some 5,000 people who arrived daily at few entry-spots at borders. After their brief retention in the transit reception centres, the next task was to execute further state sponsored and organised transfer to Schengen borders. In the fall of 2015, the arrival numbers of refugees were not lessening. Additionally, Croatia aggravated the process further, in its transfer of refugees from the borders of Serbia to Hungary and, later, to the Slovenian border. Knowing that it would be unfeasible to control the possible attenuation of the Balkan route through Bosnia and Herzegovina to Croatia, the Croatian government did not close Croatian borders with Serbia, but instead, decided to facilitate a highly controlled “few-hours” reception and then hasten transit towards Hungary and Slovenia. Such strategy increased tension between Croatia and the above-mentioned countries. On the other hand, the state response of offering free transportation across Croatian territory significantly reduced the risk and incidence of smuggling, trafficking and exploitation (Šelo Šabić, 2017). Although, we should stress that Croatia's positive, welcoming, humanitarian stance must be viewed in terms of an overtly proclaimed aim, namely, to ensure that arriving migrants were being welcomed into the country on a temporary basis only.

In Croatia, during that time, the Social Democratic government framed the crisis as the need to take a humane/humanitarian approach, as well as protecting their national (security) interests. The rightist opposition strongly criticised the government for occasional bouts of friction and disputes with neighbouring Slovenia and Hungary, even after agreeing upon a joint solution i.e. the corridor. Šelo Šabić and Borić (2016, 13) pointed out that the previous left-centrist government:

“needed to show that it was capable of controlling the crisis... [and that] Croatia would contribute to the orderly and humane transit of migrants across its territory, but would not allow itself to become a haven for migrants, a prospect feared and vociferously criticised by the opposition.”

This being so, the priority was to organise, control and execute the most effective way to achieve the swift transit of people along the Balkan corridor, with an emphasis on “responsibility, capability and humanity” of all actors in their handling of humanitarian challenges—and providing—at the very least, temporary shelter, food, clothes and medicine in the Croatian transit reception camps. Such a stance has been summarised, in the words of the former prime minister, thus:

“You are welcome in Croatia and you can pass through Croatia. But, go on. Not because we don’t like you, but because this is not your final destination”.⁸

Laid bare, the state’s “public-face” strategy of advocating human(itarian) approaches was, in practice, restricted to enabling a more humane “transit” process rather than one of aiding “longer-term solutions” such as assured residence status and local integration into Croatian society. Nonetheless, migrants personally, did wish for trajectories following that line, because a huge majority of them did want to leave Croatia and head further West.⁹

Parliamentary elections in Croatia, in November 2015, also influenced the ways in which the political, media and public discourse towards the movement of people was shaped and presented as a situation of, firstly, “refugee arrivals” and then, later, as one of “refugee/migration crisis”. This reconceptualization coincides with the start of more serious securitisation practices of ethnic profiling of “*genuine* refugees” (Syrian, Iraqi and Afghani nationals) as opposed to “other” migrant nationalities being contained at borders. In first days of people arriving and “trespassing” through Croatia, media reporting on refugees was, in the main, mostly positive. The media promoted personal stories of people, exemplifying their suffering, gratitude of acceptance in Croatia and overall sympathetic treatment by police officers and other civil servants working with them. A level of annoyance at the way in which they were treated in Greece, Macedonia, Serbia and Hungary was visibly evident. One aspect was a focus on the stories of the local population from the easternmost Croatian counties, who recalled their own experience of displacement and solidarity during the war in 1990s.

Following parliamentary elections in November 2015 the new government—which was a political coalition dominated by rightist parties—has adopted a similar discourse of responsibility and humanity in their handling of the migrations.¹⁰ However, the new government’s focus, gradually over time, and especially after Paris terrorist attacks and Köln harassments shifted more and more towards convergence with Slovenian, Hungarian and the Visegrad group’s securitisation discourse on preventing irregular migration, fighting smuggling networks, handling the forcible returns and defending borders and presumed national interests.

Similarly, other countries along the Balkan corridor, also expanded gradually in a direction of securitisation of asylum issues and deterioration of refugee and migrant rights. When mass-arrivals started, the Macedonian government allowed the transit of migrants to Serbia. However, later on, push-back practices were implemented, enforced by the police, army patrols, and the use of tear-gas at borders, in order to deflect people back to Greece. This

⁸ See Guardian (2015).

⁹ Out of 660,000 counts of migrants, only a small fraction of them (some twenty-four) lodged asylum applications during the corridor phase in Croatia (Ombudsman, 2016, 152).

¹⁰ Ultimately, the left-centrist government lost in the parliamentary elections, but more because of perceived poor economic performance and social politics, rather than the issue of migration management.

approach served only to further intensify already existing tensions between the two states. Similarly, Vezovnik (2017, 25) stresses how, in order to protect state borders from irregular movements, both Croatian and Slovenian authorities in 2016 delegated some of the border-police tasks to the army forces, should the security situation merit such intervention.

RELATIONS BETWEEN THE STAKEHOLDERS IN HANDLING “THE CRISIS”

In all countries along the Balkan corridor, international and local NGOs provided considerable humanitarian aid to arriving migrants. Here, we can distinguish between, at least, four types of interrelated efforts of the NGOs: i) the mobilisation and organisation of large numbers of local and foreign volunteers who provided immediate assistance to newcomers at borders and in transit reception camps; ii) Citizen donations of various necessities to migrants, where such actions were often initiated and organised by NGOs, which also distributed the donated items to the migrants; iii) NGOs provided relevant information to the migrants and volunteers and the local population. Part of this endeavour focused on fighting prejudices and xenophobia; iv) Last, but not least, several NGOs took on the role of watchdog by providing information, appraisals and warnings about human rights violations that occurred along the corridor (Šelo Šabić and Borić 2016). However, several of the NGO-coordinated efforts were combined with, and/or controlled by, the authorities’ own endeavours to manage the transit migrations.

Deployment of emergency crisis measures shape what Rajaram (2015) calls “acceptable forms of mobilities” as solely those which are organised and controlled by states. This control was particularly evident during the overtly securitised, highly controlled and effective swift reception and transit of refugees within the Croatian territory.

The transit system in Croatia consisted of two reception camps. The first mass-arrivals were managed via the reception camp close to the Serbian border in Opatovac. At the beginning of November 2015, the new Winter Reception Transit Centre in Slavonski Brod opened. People were transported by train to this new camp from the Serbian border under police escort. Services in the camps for refugees included basic reception and accommodation in a large UNHCR-provided warehouse heated tents, with area for single men, and separate facilities for families and vulnerable groups. Also provided was emergency medical care, and food and clothing services. There was also a child-friendly place opened by UNICEF, and a support service to help with family tracing and reunification. In addition, the specific needs of pregnant women and mothers with babies was also addressed. The Red Cross was mandated by the Croatian Government to coordinate the humanitarian assistance work of the NGOs operating within the camp (Hameršak and Pleše 2017).

In the report of Larsen et al. (2016) the authors concluded that, within the reception transit camps, mutually cooperative and coordinated action was evident. The report posits that the involvement of local authorities and communities was based on their responses during the humanitarian crises generated by war in 1990s and a natural disaster in 2014 (Larsen et al. 2016, 5). It involved an extensive number of international, national and local stakeholders that provided fast and appropriate responses to meet people’s needs. At the same time, one arguably “beneficial consequence” of this level of effectiveness was that authorities could more easily achieve their particular aims, namely, to ensure the rapid mobility of migrants through and out of the country and thus out of their remit of responsibility.

Analysing how the state and society reacted to mass-arrivals of refugees at Keleti train station in Budapest, in the summer of 2015, Kallius et al. (2016, 10) writes how:

„[m]igrants both challenge and confirm the vertical politics of state power, whether that power is expressed through the state’s immobilisation strategies or through volunteers’ humanitarian intervention.”

At the same time, new forms of “horizontal solidarities” originated from dialectics of *ad hoc* coalitions among different stakeholders (such as various activists, volunteers, humanitarians, service providers, etc.) who were helping refugees. Similar tendencies were observed in the Croatian context. For example, humanitarian organisations’ ability to operate in the state-led transit centres always had to be approved by the vertical, hierarchical power structure, embedded in the Ministry of the Interior. “The crisis” coordinating body that was set up during the floods in Croatia was the same organisational structure mobilised by the “National Crisis Headquarters for the Migrant Crisis”, which included several ministries, the National Protection and Rescue Directorate and the Croatian Red Cross. However, several representatives we met, from various NGOs, had stressed that the institutional capacity to manage large-scale movements of people was also shaped by the strategy of controlled and organised transit through the country rather than by unambiguously expressed solidarity towards refugees’ concerns. And it seems that in achieving that aim many of the basic humanitarian and human rights’ standards were called into question.¹¹

Local NGOs played an important role as indirect or direct facilitators of transit migrations through the country, very often following the same humanitarian-securitisation logic. However, the authorities’ aim of swift transit, and the security concerns of the police, stood in conflict with rights-based and direct solidarity approaches of humanitarian actors in assisting refugees in terms of meeting their daily needs within the camps. Different old and new refugee-rights, human-rights and humanitarian organisations, associations, initiatives and networks were involved in humanitarian work. They participated, more or less in a formal capacity, in immediate aid and assistance practices, responding to needs of people, working at border crossing points and in reception centres. Few of them were religious and faith-based groups while others were more or less professional, secular, civil initiatives and networks.

Some of them chose to participate only in humanitarian help yet—indirectly—they were also party to aiding the securitisation practices laid down by the authorities. The activities of the NGOs within the camps were also closely monitored by the state. Thus, until its closure in April 2016, the camp in Slavonski Brod had remained a highly securitised place where involvement of various actors was defined and restricted by the state apparatus. Within this framework, the activities and roles of humanitarian and solidarity based organisations became undermined. Within such a context there were few opportunities for political engagement in terms of challenging and opposing such a rigid state security regime. However, some of the NGOs were more sceptical than others in terms of how the authorities were constructing and dealing with “the crisis”. These actors remained critically oriented in their reflections on the securitisation practices of the state bodies: in particular, those that most directly interfered with their everyday activities in the camp, and the rights of refugees (for example, unreasonable detention of refugees, prohibiting volunteers’ specific activities across the various sectors, etc.).

Some civil organisations and individuals started the “Refugees Welcome Initiative”, as a kind of humanitarian platform, advocacy initiative, and a network for organising volunteers. Other citizens interested to help started the “Are you Syrious?” network, which has become the largest grass-root citizens’ initiative all along the Balkan corridor. They expanded their network of volunteers and activities helping along the Syrian-Turkish border, at Idomeni and other camps in Greece, all the way to Calais. Both initiatives took on a more antagonistic stance towards the authorities, some of them taking on a “watch-dog” role and becoming increasingly

¹¹ This was also emphasized in the report of Larsen et al. (2016, 5).

critical to the work of the authorities fostering transnational and trans-border solidarity and cooperation while disobeying and challenging the dominant official discourses of the crisis and securitisation. Their similar humanitarian and solidarity practices also connected them with other regional and international humanitarian and refugee rights actors along and across the Balkan corridor, through activities such as information sharing, institutional and non-formal networking, political framing of solidarity as well as advocating welcoming, inclusive attitudes and more open, fair and humane EU policies and protection systems.

FALL OF THE BALKAN CORRIDOR AND THE DETTERENT MEASURES

At the beginning of 2016, Austria restricted the number of refugee arrivals by introducing restrictive limits on the number of asylum claims permitted. The drastic measure of reducing asylum applications to 80 per day came into force, with 3,200 refugees being transported into Germany on a daily basis. In mid-February 2016, the heads of police forces in the countries of Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia and Austria, came together to hold a meeting in the Croatian capital, Zagreb. At this meeting, they agreed on reducing “the refugee flow” (now conceptualised as “migrants’ flow”) through the joint adoption of a standardised migrant registration system, supporting the FRONTEX activities, and selecting and profiling migrants on the basis of their nationality. In effect, this meant the gradual ending of the Balkan corridor as a safe passageway for refugees. The aim of reducing the refugee flow was taken seriously by those countries in the region. In 2016, we witnessed several new deterrent measures being implemented. In Hungary, Slovenia and Macedonia, authorities decided to reinforce the barbed wire fence and boosted the presence of army and police forces along their borders. Also, Serbia formed joint police and military units for the purpose of patrolling its borders with Macedonia and Bulgaria. And in Croatia, the government proposed military measures in which the Croatian national army would be allowed to support the police in armed protection of the borders.¹² Such securitisation and deterrent measures were combined in most countries in the region with harsher treatment meted out on arriving migrants. These measures supplemented the EU-Turkey agreement which directly contributed to ending of the Western Balkan corridor.

The EU-Turkey Summit and agreement was signed on March 7, 2016.¹³ On the following day, Slovenia closed its border, announcing its full compliance with the Schengen Border Code and, consequently, the same was done by Croatia, Serbia, and Macedonia. In the following days it became apparent that tens of thousands refugees and other forced migrants were trapped at Idomeni on the Greek-Macedonian border. Several reports made by NGOs emphasised that non-Syrian-Iraqi-Afghani (non-SIA) nationals had been denied access to protection system, let alone denied access to the desired territories of Schengen EU. Thus, the basic provisions of international refugee law, skewed by German politics (i.e. allowing access to Germany as a “desired territory”, regardless of Dublin Regulation), in few months it became unattainable for asylum seekers previously passing through the Balkan corridor.

After the Balkan corridor was, to a great extent, closed off, we also can identify the increased resentment against migrants and increased interest of the involved authorities towards many of securitisation practices, that remained to take place in a “post-emergency setting”. This refers not only to direct detention, readmission and push-backs on the very

¹² In March 2016, the Croatian Act on State Border control, was amended with a series of provisions under which the army was given the right to “provide assistance to border police for protection of national borders in the event of security or humanitarian needs” (RoC 2016).

¹³ The EU-Turkey agreement included several important elements that contributed to the reduction of migrant outflows from Turkey. For further details, see EC (2016) and CoEU (2016).

borders of Schengen, but also to high rejection rates and resentment to relocation and resettlement quotas. Indeed, in several countries, these proposals were openly rejected by governments. Of those who are now being forcibly returned to countries in the South Eastern Europe, via the Dublin regulation, readmission arrangements result in an increasing number of rejected, stranded asylum seekers. Throughout the region, there is a clear lack of workable policies and programs of assistance for these people. Also a few of those who got protection and the refugee status experience absence of proper integration opportunities and assistance. This includes an absence of language learning facilities, a lack of education opportunities, inadequate welfare provision, exclusion from the labour market and civic participation. In this way, asylum seekers and refugees are kept in a situation of protracted stress and trauma.

Furthermore, changes in national asylum and migration policies of several countries in the region - lay down provisions which tend to criminalise certain solidarity practices of direct help and support to migrants, thus pushing the debate further into the scope of irregularity and illegality. It is repeatedly noted in various reports that these restrictive developments in the legal framework also include implementation of highly problematic, institutional obstacles for refugee arrivals. For example, the BCHR et al. (2017) report indicated that asylum seekers have, regularly, been arbitrarily expelled across the region, from one country to another, very often with the use of brute force, intimidation and devious tactics by state authorities, denying them access to the asylum procedure. In this way, even the two basic pillars, enshrined in the international refugee protection standards, such as an access to territory and access to procedure of applying for international protection, are obstructed and restricted.¹⁴

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this chapter, we contextualised and analysed the local responses on transit migrations over the Balkan corridor during the recent massive arrivals of refugees in Europe in 2015-6. It is maintained that the most of asylum-seekers who arrived to South-eastern Europe were not eager to apply for asylum in countries in this region. Inadequate reception conditions and lack of integration opportunities, and extremely high rejection rates, have been some of the major factors that deterred asylum seekers from the region.¹⁵ Hence, only a small, insignificant number decided to apply for a status that acknowledges the Balkans as a transit area they need to traverse in order to reach anticipated destinations in Western Europe. However, the European asylum system has developed several lines of deterrence, which are intended to prevent asylum seekers to reach these wishing destinations.¹⁶ In order to apply for asylum and get refugee protection, it is necessary to first arrive in Europe, which is aggravated in many ways. Several physical and juridical obstacles, designed to prevent such migrations, must first be overcome. These impediments have had a clear and marked effect on asylum migrations. The externalisation measures, the Schengen/Dublin cooperation, readmissions, pushbacks and other deterrent measures have, for years, contributed to reducing the numbers of asylum seekers reaching the core of the EU.

However, the deterring tools of the European migration system malfunctioned during the summer of 2015 when the (Western) Balkan corridor gradually emerged as a semi-institutionalised passage for the swift transit of Syrian and other refugees and migrants via Turkey to Western Europe. It was a corridor that lasted until the spring of 2016. Indeed, with

¹⁴ For example, the Hungarian authorities introduced in June 2016, “deep border control” which allows police to deport migrants who were detected within eight kilometres from the border.

¹⁵ See for more Coleridge 2013; Baričević 2013; Brekke and Brochmann 2015; Valenta et al. 2015; Porobić and Župarić-Iljić, 2017.

¹⁶ For more see Boswell 2003; Triandafyllidou and Dimitriadi 2014.

a rise of the Balkan corridor, many migration obstacles were put aside for a short period of time, and the existence of the corridor came to be a unique, controlled and state-managed passage for the massive transient movement of populations to desired destinations in Germany and other Western Europe countries. This recent mass influx of migrants will be remembered for being the impetus of several unexpected changes in positioning of countries at the south-eastern frontier of the EU. These countries, politically and administratively, constructed this phenomenon as one of refugee transit, and, later on, linked as one of “migrant crisis”. One that seeks exceptional and immediate emergency relief measures in a situation of mass-arrivals of people. Encountering thousands of migrants along their shores and borders, countries abandoned their usual standard responses. The ordinary measures of deterrence were put aside. Instead, Balkan countries formally defined themselves as transit countries, opening their borders, and allowing, even facilitating their further journey onto the next country through the corridor, into the core of the EU.

Indeed, at the peak of mass-arrivals, the national governments along the corridor prioritised a fast, controlled and accelerated transit over Dublin registrations and detainments. Moreover, this stance was supported by local NGOs as they saw that the corridor reduced the human costs of migration to the West. Thus, they cooperated with authorities by providing various forms of humanitarian help to transiting migrants. At the dawn of the Balkan corridor, security discourses were again more and more prominent in the official responses, media representations and public opinion, while measures of deterrence were re-established and reinforced. With these measures, criticisms of the authorities’ policy also increased among the civil organisations, which resulted in the cooperation between the authorities and the local humanitarian actors becoming soured.

During the existence of the Balkan corridor, different approaches of humanitarianism and securitisation intertwined and interplayed together, balancing from humanitarian aid, assistance and solidarity with refugees – to that of detainment, forcible returns, push-backs and other securitisation practices.¹⁷ The welcoming politics of transit assistance gradually diminished over restrictive solutions, embodied in the closure of the corridor, and re-introduction of rigid border regimes with interception at borders, readmission and deportation measures. In the post-corridor period, the SEE countries are not any more transiting areas for large numbers of migrants as they were in 2015 and 2016. Yet, hundreds of migrants are still trying to cross the region on a daily basis. In the post-corridor period, the costs of migration through the region have increased, since they are not assisted by the authorities as they were during the existence of the corridor. In the current situation, they have to trespass unnoticed on their journeys further north in the migration system, in order to avoid detention, registration and push-back. Those who end up as asylum seekers in the region have often been characterised as reluctant or stranded asylum seekers. They remain there against their will and, due to the Dublin regulation, are denied applying for asylum in intended destination countries.¹⁸

It seems that initial responses to the situation of mass-arrivals of more than a million refugees—and the unfolding of a potential “humanitarian crisis”—actually stem from the challenges of finding common and effective institutional solutions in order to facilitate burden-sharing, and reception of newcomers. Rejecting the responsibility of sharing in a form of relocation and resettlement quotas, the EU member states failed to provide mutual trust and contingency in terms of its basic values - achieving solidarity among member states, within the common asylum system. Indeed, the way the Union dealt with the recent mass inflows has revealed deep weaknesses in the EU cooperation structure. The aim of Brussels to deal with the mass-arrivals through common, collective action – based on a responsibility-sharing

¹⁷ See Župarić-Iljić and Valenta, 2018, (*forthcoming*)

¹⁸ See Brekke and Brochmann 2015; Valenta et al 2015.

principle – with cooperation and solidarity between the countries - has not been achieved. But what may be said about the particularities of the West Balkan countries' responses? Have they achieved their aims?

In the post-corridor period, there are still sizable numbers of asylum seekers in the region. Balkan countries have never been popular destination countries for asylum seekers. During the mass influx in 2015 and 2016, they were popular transit countries, but due to recently deployed deterrent policies and tools in the region, they are not popular in that sense neither. However, at the time of writing this chapter (Summer 2017) it seems that the strategy of aided transit further up in the system used by Croatia and most of the countries in the region in 2015 and 2016 has succeeded. The aim of the local authorities was to avoid becoming the hub/hotspot for large numbers of refugees and, indeed, most of the countries along the corridor that admitted hundreds of thousands of migrants in 2015 and 2016, did not end up as large hubs for asylum seekers, as was the case with Germany and Sweden. But, it should be noted that the above-mentioned strategy of aided transit has provoked many reactions in the EU. In terms of the Dublin regulation, EU countries bordering the Balkan corridor, such as Croatia, are currently being pressed by other EU countries to re-admit large numbers of asylum seekers that were transiting the Balkans during 2015 and 2016h. The local authorities fiercely oppose these claims. It remains to be seen whether Croatia and other countries in the region will be forced to accept massive returns of asylum seekers from other EU countries.¹⁹ It is unclear who will win this dispute, but, on the other hand, it is absolutely clear that the local authorities in the region do not have adequate reception and resettlement facilities as well as efficient integration programs to offer to large groups of persons seeking or enjoying international refugee protection. In these circumstances different socio-political, administrative, and humanitarian challenges may unfold even with smaller numbers of refugees than those we have witnessed trespassing during the corridor phase, one that was defined and contested as “the refugee/migration crisis”.

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¹⁹ In July 2017, by the judgment of the Court of Justice of the European Union, and calling on Dublin III Regulation, the Republic of Croatia is regarded as responsible for all those who crossed its border irregularly in the mass-arrivals of 2015-6. It is yet to be seen how this decision will reshape the Croatian protection system in practice. For more see CJEU (2017).

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