

## A Social Cafè along the Balkan Route

The Balkan Route is a geographical corridor in use for several decades for traffics of drugs, weapons and humans from the Middle East and Asia, which took on a crucial role in the history of migration in 2015, the year in which 853,650 people used this route to reach Europe through Turkey, Greece and the Western Balkans, through the opening of a system of hot-spots that guaranteed migrants security and protection along the way through these countries. These were, in particular, Syrian, Afghan and Iraqi citizens, that escape from wars and attacks, soon joined by thousands of people from all over the world.

To counter the increasing numbers of people in transit along this route, on 19 March 2016 an agreement was signed between the European Union and Turkey, which provides for the outsourcing of borders in exchange for money for the management of migrants. Since then, the Balkan route has been officially declared closed. In fact, it remains closed on paper and the mechanism of hot-spots is interrupted, but the route is still used and it's back in the hands and management of smugglers, bringing the level of risk back to the highest levels for people who have to travel.

At the time of signature of the agreement, more than 140,000 people remain trapped in Greece and hundreds of migrants continue to land on the islands every day. More than 7,000 people are blocked along the transit centres and asylum camps that are set up between Macedonia and Serbia.

Throughout 2016 and 2017, thousands of migrants continue their attempt to reach EU countries by illegally crossing the borders along the Balkan route, colliding with the wall built by Orban in Hungary or being victims of violence by the Croatian police, which increases controls and rejections beyond their borders, sending migrants back to Serbia, where they find shelter in 18 government centres built during the crisis and managed by the Kirs (Commissioner for Refugees and Migration in Serbia).

In the spring of 2018, with the closing of the northern crossing between Serbia, Croatia and Hungary, hundreds of migrants began to move to Bosnia Herzegovina heading towards the western border a few kilometers from Croatia, mainly in the city of Bihać and Velika Kladuša, while a few hundred remain in the asylum centres opened between Sarajevo and Mostar.

People registered in Bosnia come mainly from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Syria. They are people who have travelled from Greece and arrive via Albania and Montenegro, or Macedonia and Serbia.

According to UNHCR data, it is estimated that 24,100 migrants passed through Bosnia in 2018, who then continued their journey to Croatia, Slovenia and other EU countries.

In 2018, seven shelters were set up to deal with the crisis in the country, most of these are managed by IOM (International Organization for Migrations) and UNHCR in collaboration with the DRC (Danish Refugee Council) and the local Red Cross.

If today in Serbia the situation is stable and relatively under control and the approximately 4200 migrants present in the country are accommodated in uncrowded centres, the situation in Bosnia is constantly worsening: inadequate structures, cold, poor sanitary conditions and continuous violent push back by the Croatian police along the border increase the tension and discomfort among the people living in the camps and the living conditions in these centres becomes more and more difficult every day.

Along these borders, every day dozens of people try to cross the border illegally. This is the so-called attempt to go to the game, in which the stakes are the lives of migrants who, in the mountains, in the minefields, in the frozen and impetuous rivers, are looking for a better future for themselves and their families.

These trips put people's lives at risk every day, particularly those of children and the most vulnerable.

### The projects

After a presence of monitoring and humanitarian interventions along the Balkan route between 2015 and 2016, in May 2017 IPSIA with local partners (Caritas Valjevo and Caritas Belgrade) and Italian partners (Caritas Italian and Ambrosian), starts an intervention of psycho-social support in the refugee camps of Bogovadja, and then of Krnjača, in Serbia.

This project provides psychological support, animation, stress relief, cultural and educational activities for residents of camps in Serbia.

The aim is to organise different types of activities in order to improve the quality of time that people spend in the field.

In particular, in Bogovadja, in front of the main entrance of the camp, there is the *Social cafe*: it is a space of aggregation and sharing, where hot drinks are provided and where activities related to non-formal education and learning, computer and language courses, career guidance and vocational training are carried out, with the aim of identifying the different learning needs, but also to support the first steps towards European integration.

On 21 December 2018, Ipsia officially entered Bihać's largest camp, Bira, and opened the so-called *Čaj Corner*.

Inside the former Bira refrigerator factory, which hosts more than 2,000 people, especially men, in containers and tents, a gathering space has been created that allows the guests of the camp to exchange words, play, drink hot tea and share

moments together that allow to relax the tension that is often created between the various nationalities present in the structure. Every day more than 500 teas are distributed and various recreational activities are organized. At Bira 5 Italian operators and volunteers from IPSIA work every day, together with volunteers from other organizations.

### General objective

The objective of the project is to reduce the discomfort of people during their stay in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, improving the quality of their lives within the accommodation facilities.

Ipsia's intervention in the refugee camps along the *Balkan route* focuses mainly on:

- Organization of psychosocial support activities (listening, thematic groups, *social cafe* and *čaj corner*, manual and recreational workshops, activities with women and children, animation, sports...);
- Links between migrants' needs and the realities able to satisfy them (IOM, UNHCR, Red Cross). Through constant work in the field, IPSIA volunteers and operators come into contact with people's needs and identify the organizations that can provide for them. In some urgent and vulnerable cases, direct action is taken through donations of clothing, shoes, materials and medicines;
- Participation and support in the activities of local organizations (distribution of meals, logistics of the camp, distribution of clothes, first aid ...);
- Awareness raising of the Italian territory on the developments of the migration emergency along the Balkan route

### Specific objectives and activities

Within the fields, a general malaise is clearly visible. In some contexts it is also a physical and material discomfort related to the reception conditions, but especially in all realities we recognize a psychological discomfort related to the long duration and uncertainty of the migration path undertaken, violence and trauma suffered, the lack of short-term prospects.

In Bosnia, in the Bira camp, people live in overcrowded tents or containers and the routine identical to itself from day to day increases the daily suffering, which in turn feeds the tension and the outbreak of violence between the various groups present.

The activities carried out by Ipsia in this field focus mainly on the creation of spaces for sharing and socialization with the aim of reducing stress through:

- continuation and expansion of the activity at Čaj Corner (distribution of hot tea and activities of socialization and recreation);
- installation of an outdoor gym to give the guests of the camp the opportunity to practice sports, thus reducing tensions due to the lack of recreational activities;
- creation of a collective kitchen to allow the camp's guests to cook their own dishes to encourage cultural sharing and rediscover a sense of home;
- manual and recreational activities of workshops with the women present in the reception facilities.

In Serbia, in Bogovadja and Belgrade, the conditions in the camps are more dignified and less oppressive.

The activities focus mainly on the creation of spaces for sharing and socialization and on the attempt to facilitate relations between migrants, who in large part have been in the camps for almost two years, and the local population through:

- continuation and expansion of the activity of the *Social Café* of Bogovadja (distribution of tea and coffee, socialization and recreation activities, training, animation);
- to favour the integration of migrants in the host context by facilitating the contact between the camp residents and the local population (cultural initiatives, exchanges, sports activities...).

The funds raised will go to support the expenses related to the support and implementation of all the activities of the *Social Cafe* in Bogovadja and the *Čaj Corner* in Bihac.