

## **The Last Game. The new migrants Balkan route. August 2019 - July 2021**

The Balkan migratory route has changed in recent years. With the borders of Serbia and Hungary sealed, multitudes of desperate people from the war theaters of the Middle East and North Africa, but also from Asia, try to enter Europe through Croatia and Slovenia. Between 2018 and 2021, around 20,000 migrants arrived from Greece and Turkey via the Balkans. Afghans, Syrians, Pakistanis and Iraqis, but also Iranians, Kabili Moroccans, Algerians, Kurds and, more recently, Eritreans, Somalis, and Ethiopians, who are fleeing an increasingly turbulent Horn of Africa.

Starting point for what migrants ironically call “The Game” is Bosnia and Herzegovina. Here tens of thousands of people have arrived, and continue to arrive, in the cities of Bihać and Velika Kladuša, located a few kilometers from the border with Croatia. They are welcomed to a small extent in the very harsh camps managed by the United Nations agency IOM (International Organization for Migration), where the living conditions are generally, as is the case of that of Lipa, 30 kilometers away from the city of Bihać. Or by finding refuge in abandoned houses and factories and, in the summer season, sleeping outdoors in the countryside and in the woods surrounding the cities, where the mines dating back to the Balkan conflict often still claim victims. It is in these border towns that NGO volunteers, both local and international, carry out their mission of help, providing clothes, food, medical care and legal support on a daily basis to those in need.

“The Game” is a fierce and rigged game, which offers migrants very little chance to enter the “Fortress Europe”, forcing them to attempt, even dozens of times in a row, a risky and sometimes deadly obstacle course.

On the border, the Croatian border guard, well armed and equipped with advanced territorial control technologies, generously provided by the EU, and in particular by Germany, operates in the manner of a ruthless Balkan militia. Not limited to collective rejections only, a practice prohibited by international laws on the right of asylum. In fact, “captured” people are often severely beaten by agents. Which, in addition to stealing the little money in their possession, destroy those mobile phones, which represent a possible, embarrassing, proof, thanks to geolocation, of illegal rejection. Often stripped, always deprived of shoes, practices that do not spare women, the elderly and children, the migrants are then forced to return to Bosnia and Herzegovina by violence.

In recent years, moreover, there are more and more frequent cases of people, mostly Afghans, including unaccompanied minors, who accidentally arrived in Italy, and from there illegally deported by the police of this country. Just beyond the border, but also in the cities of Trieste and Milan. Police who hand over them, on the basis of agreements between security forces contrary to EU and international regulations, to the Slovenian one, which in turn delegates the expulsion to Bosnia to the Croatian security forces.

A chain of illegality through which Europe denies access to its territory to people who are often fleeing the dramatic ongoing conflicts, such as the Afghan and Syrian ones. Demonstrating, in fact, that the human rights and international laws of which the EU claims to be the spokesperson are more or less respected depending on the nationality or countries of origin of the possible beneficiaries of the same.



Lipa migrant camp, located about 30 km away from the city of Bihać. The management of the camp, rebuilt after a fire that almost completely destroyed it last winter, will pass from that of the UN agency IOM (International Organization for Migration), much criticized for the poor condition of the old camp, to that of the SFA, the Bosnian Foreign Affairs Service of the local Ministry of Security.



Afghan migrants cook inside an abandoned factory located on the outskirts of the city of Bihać.



An Algerian migrant shows the injuries to his hands caused by the beating of the Croatian border police.



A camp of Afghan migrants in an abandoned factory located on the outskirts of the city of Bihać.



An Algerian Berber migrant sleeps in the sleeping bag in the meadows in front of the former Miral factory, not far from Velika Kladuša.



Ashequllah Husayn, from Afghanistan, Paktia, 21 yr old. Ashequllah is the oldest child of all girl family, he has 4 sisters and all of them are still in Paktia. He fled Afghanistan when he was 17 years old and he is hoping to find a better future in Europe. He was a part of Afghani group that was stopped by the Italian police in Milan in 2021 (approximately in the months of March or April) and deported to Slovenia. As others, he was beaten by the Croatian police, with all of his belongings taken away, and departed to Bosnia and Herzegovina.



Khan Ramadan, from Afghanistan, Paktia, 20 yr old. Khan is the youngest member of the Afghani group that was stopped by the Italian police in Milan 2021 (approximately in the months of March or April) and deported to Slovenia. He left Paktia when he was only 16 years old, his whole family still lives there. He dreams of reaching Germany or Netherlands and helping his family for better living. He was harassed by the Croatian police and deported back to Bosnia and Herzegovina.



Migrants lined up for a hot meal inside the Lipa camp, located about 25 kilometers from the city of Bihac.



Most of the migrants who reject the poor living conditions offered by the “official” camps live in abandoned houses and factories, such as this one located on the outskirts of the city of Bihac.



In the woods surrounding the Lipa migrant camp, located 25 kilometers from the city of Bihać, there is still a massive presence of mine. Dating back to the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, these mine represent a deadly danger for migrants attempting to cross the border between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia.



In the city of Bihać, in front of the abandoned factory of Bira, formerly used as a camp for migrants by the UN agency IOM International Organisation for Migration), a banner of a local committee of citizens opposes the possible reopening of the camp.



An Afghan migrant bathes in the Una River, in a urban park in the center of the city of Bihać.



Velika Kladuša, the feet of an Algerian migrant injured by the beating of the Croatian border police.



Jalal Hadi, from Afghanistan, Nangahar, 17 yr old. Jalal was a part of the Afghani male group deported by the Italian police from Trieste in 2020. He dreams of staying in Italy, where his sister lives with her husband for the past 8 years. As a minor he was deported back to Bosnia and Herzegovina, via Slovenia and Croatia, without Asil that he demanded.



Kamran Seherzad, from Afghanistan, Nangahar, 17 yr old. In June of 2021 Kamran was travelling with his friends from Afghanistan and managed to reach Trieste, but was deported back by the Italian border police. His English skills are excellent and he demanded Asil for him and his friends, saying that he's coming from a war zone and that he was a minor, but all of that was ignored and he was deported to Bosnia & Herzegovina, via Slovenia and Croatia. His dream is to work in robotics and to help his parents, 4 brothers and 4 sisters that are still in Nangahar



The border between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia near the town of Šturlić.



Middle Eastern migrants in the city of Velika Kladuša are heading towards the border with Croatia, the gateway to try to seek asylum in Europe.



Beaten and humiliated by the Croatian border police, the Iraqi heads of families cover their faces.



Pakistani migrants show cell phones smashed by Croatian border police.



Pakistani migrants rest outside the former Miral factory, not far from Velika Kladuša, where the UN agency IOM (International Organisation of Migration) has set up a first aid camp for migrants. Where not everyone is allowed to access.



In Velika Kladuša a Syrian migrant with a broken arm from the beatings of the Croatian border police.



A family of Afghan migrants, after being illegally deported to Bosnia and Herzegovina by the Croatian border police for the nineteenth time in a row, heads to the city of Velika Kladuša.



Amir Hamid, from Afghanistan, Nangahar, 19 yr old. Amir was travelling with 4 other people from Afghanistan, and they managed to cross Italian border, almost reached Trieste in 2021 (approximately in the months of March or April) when they were caught by the Italian border police, shoved into the van and deported to Slovenia. Slovenian border police ignored their Asil requests and they were hand out to the Croatian police that deported them back to Bosnia and Herzegovina.



Iftekhar Nazeri, from Afghanistan, Kunar, 17 yr old. At just 17 years old Iftekhar is travelling towards Western Europe, he left his hometown when he was 15 years old. He was with a group of Afghani people who were stopped by the Italian border police near Trieste in 2021 springtime and deported back to Bosnia & Herzegovina via Slovenia and Croatia. He demanded Asil but was not granted with it.



A van of the international NGO “No Name Kitchen” with backpacks, clothes and food that will be distributed to migrants in the city of Bihać.



Two young volunteers of “No Name Kitchen”, an international OGN, run around with an old van every night to bring food, water, shoes and clothes to migrants camped in abandoned farmhouses or in disused factories. Food distributions and other comfort items are also organized in their VVelika Kladuša. The OGN has created a database of interviews with migrants that proves the illegal violence and refoulement they have been subjected to for years by the Croatian border police.



An Iranian migrant expelled from Germany waits for the night near the city of Šturlić to try to cross the border between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, hoping to be able to return to Europe.



Migrants in a ruined house, where they sleep, near the village of Šturlić, in Bosnia.



An Iraqi children and his mother, blocked by the Croatian police and illegally rejected in Bosnia and Herzegovina near the town of Velika Kladuša, after being robbed and threatened.



At night, in the moonlight, a family of Iranian migrants walks on a mountain path in Croatian territory, immediately after crossing the border near the Bosnian town of Šturlić.



Hamdallah Safer, from Afghanistan, Kunar, 22 yr old. Hamdallah started his trip from Kunar 3 years ago, where he left his whole family. In 2020 he reached Italy but was departed from Trieste by the border police. Since this happened during the pandemic, they were held in quarantine in Slovenia for 5 days and then sent back to Bosnia and Herzegovina, via Croatia.



Roman Alizai, from Afghanistan, Kunar, 18 yr old. Roman is following people from his place on a way to Europe. He was with a group of people that was stopped by the Italian border police in 2020 in Trieste, held in quarantine in Slovenia for 5 days and then deported to Bosnia & Herzegovina via Croatia.



An Afghan migrant inside an abandoned factory not far from the city center of Bihać.



In an abandoned factory on the outskirts of the city of Bihać, Afghan migrants pack cigarettes to sell as a form of economic sustenance.



Afghan migrants camped inside an abandoned factory on the outskirts of the city center of Bihać.



On the outskirts of Bihać, Afghan migrants fill cans with drinking water thanks to the solidarity of Bosnian citizens who allow them to use their water network.



An Afghan migrant cooks inside a squat on the outskirts of the city of Bihać.



Only very few of the migrants who arrived in Bosnia during the Covid-19 pandemic have medical devices to defend themselves from the infection, such as masks and hand disinfectants.



Sarfaraz Rassooli, from Afghanistan, Paktia. 34 yr old. He abandoned Afghanistan 6 years ago, his father, mother and three brothers are still there and they hope he'll reach Europe to provide them a better future. He was part of the Afghani group that was stopped by the Italian police in Milan in Milan in 2021 (approximately in the months of March or April) and deported to Slovenia. He was also harassed in Croatia and returned to Bosnia & Herzegovina.



The Afghan migrant in the city of Bihać shows the injuries to his foot caused by the beating of the Croatian border police during his capture and push back to Bosnia.



One of the abandoned factories in the city of Bihać where thousands of migrants find precarious refuge before attempting “The Game”. Some of the abandoned factories, inside or on the outskirts of the city, have been evicted by the police in recent months.



Yasin is 11 years old and fled with his father from Afghanistan in the war. He tried to enter Europe eleven times to ask for humanitarian protection and eleven times he was illegally and violently rejected and deported by the Croatian and Slovenian police. He now lives in an abandoned factory in the town of Bihać.



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An Algerian Berber migrant beaten to death by the Croatian border police and illegally deported to Bosnia near the city of Velika Kladuša.



A Pakistani migrant in an informal camp in the woods, called by migrants “the jungle”, near the town of Velika Kladuša. Many of the migrant encampments in the woods have been evicted several times by the police.



An Eritrean migrant sleeps in a tent of an informal camp in the woods near the city of Bihać.



An African migrant carries a tank of drinking water to an informal camp in a wooded area where he lives with other migrants near the city of Bihać.



Somalis and Eritreans migrants inside an informal camp on the outskirts of the city of Bihać.



Ziya Rahman Safer, from Afghanistan, Kunar, 16 yr old. Ziya Rahman is travelling with his family members, and he was deported from Trieste by the Italian border police in 2020. He was held in quarantine for 5 days and then deported to Bosnia and Herzegovina, via Croatia. He dreams of a European life and better future.



Ghaus Ullah Safer, from Afghanistan, Kunar, 24 yr old. Ghausullah is travelling with his family members trying to reach Europe. He was with them in Trieste when, in 2020, they were deported to Slovenia (5 days quarantine) and then to Bosnia & Herzegovina, via Croatia.