



REPORT:

# MIGRANT CRISIS IN CROATIA



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# Migrant Crisis in Croatia



*Boro Grubisic, Member of the Croatian Parliament, at the entrance of the camp Opatovac*

Slavonski Brod, 10th October 2015 - for over a month now Croatian headlines are flooded with news about refugees, asylum seekers or how they will be referred to in this report: migrants, coming from Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh and even Nepal and crossing month other, the Croatian eastern border hoping to transit the Croatian territory and reach the countries of Western Europe ( mostly Sweden and Germany).

The number of migrants that are crossing the border is changing per minute - with an average influx of 3 -5 thousand migrants per day Croatia has seen more than 150 thousands of migrants transit its territory towards Slovenia and Hungary since the beginning of the crisis till 10th October 2015.

The migrant wave struck Croatia mid September after the Hungarian authorities placed barbed wire throughout the whole length (140 km) of its border with Serbia, and brought army and police forces in unprecedented numbers to guard the borderline.

One has to admit that the Croatian Government was not well prepared or maybe not well informed to welcome this number of migrants at its borders. Croatian Prime Minister Zoran Milanović in his

attempts to coordinate the situation made a catastrophic diplomatic mistake by completely shutting down the border crossings with Serbia at Bajakovo and Ilok, and at the same time leaving unguarded the unmarked borderline ( " green border" ) where the migrants were then crossing into Croatia through meadows, woods, farms without any form of control, identification or even organised transfers to further locations.

Reactions of the unprepared Croatian Government created somewhat an atmosphere of panic and produced more than one conflict with the neighbouring countries at the high ministerial or even Prime Minister levels.

During the first few days the Government was releasing statements mentioning certain "preexisting " plans A, B, C... but from this time stand it is visible that the crisis was controlling the Government decisions and not the other way around. Croatian Member of Parliament Boro Grubisic at one point during his speech in the Croatian Parliament plenary sessions compared the Prime Ministers behaviour to the one of the " Mad Max"!

Eventually the situation at the borderline was put under control by proper usage of the army logistics, where the soldiers built in a couple of days a transit camp for 5000 migrants in Opatovac and installed all the elements for a civilised and human welcome of migrants ( sanitation, ambulance, mobile toilets, showers etc. ) as well as an obligatory identification and registration procedure and afterwards an organised transfer in the direction of Baranjsko Petrovo Selo by bus, or by train from Tovarnik in the direction of Beli Manastir and Borovo towards the Hungarian border.

A month after the beginning of the migrant crisis it has been made clear that that the Croatian conflict with its neighbours was completely unnecessary and that there was an evident lack of cooperation within the countries of the region ( Serbia, Hungary, Slovenia and Croatia). The upcoming parliamentary elections in Croatia ( scheduled for 8th November 2015 ) have surely influenced the way the crisis has been communicated to the public, since all the political parties are trying to gather as many political points as possible from the ongoing crisis.

The biggest damage has been made to the Croatian -Serbian relations, that even without this crisis, have been in the past decades on rather unstable grounds due to the complex relation between the two countries and many unsolved bilateral issues. Furthermore, the closure of the border crossing caused severe damages to the export industries of both countries, as they were not able to trade for a full week ( the damage is estimated to 2 million EUR). Whilst all the surrounding countries are putting tremendous efforts to protect the so called "green border" out of safety reasons, Croatia's decision to close the official state border crossing comes as a clear paradox.

Complete lack of dialogue and communication between the neighbouring countries resulted with an uncommon situation were Hungary didn't want to return back to Croatia a train with its train technicians and Croatian police offers that was transporting migrants to the Hungarian city of Magyarboly. After 20 days, the train has been finally returned to Croatia after the intervention of the Croatian President Kolinda Grabar Kitarović during the meeting of the Višegrad Group ( Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland).

Momentarily the humanitarian, identification, administrative and transport aspects of the crisis are functioning well and above all expectations compared to the first days of the beginning of the crisis. That being said, it is still unclear what will happen next ? In the case of the



*EFF delegation with the medical staff of the camp Opatovac*

scenario where Brussels decides to return a certain number of refugees to Croatia: the Croatian public isn't familiarised with the Government plans where to accommodate this people, nor how to treat them in the light of the fact that for the moment only 10 of the 150 thousand that entered Croatia decided to stay in Croatia. There is another side of this scenario: the region of Slavonia and Baranja, that has been deeply affected in the Homeland war of 1990s, fears that the welcoming of a high number of migrants might leave demographic and social consequences that would be very hard to neutralise.

Further developments in this migrant crisis will be an indicator of the conflicted relation between the sincere humanitarian approach of nations and the inefficient bureaucracy of the EU administration to coordinate the crisis. Will a state like Croatia, of a population of somewhat more than 4 million and a continuous exile of its own youth, have to change its identity, traditions, values and heritage if faced with a massive influx of asylum seekers ? The parties of the right political spectrum of the Croatian political scene hold a clear standpoint in this issue: **Croatia has to defend its identity and its values, in this sense, they are following the position of the Hungarian Prime minister Viktor Orban.** Croatian government has on the other hand, enabled transit of all migrants through Croatian territories. What is interesting to mention, is the fact that the governmental forces are ready to defend at all cost the south border ( Dubrovnik area) and are strategically handling the migrant issues at the east border, causing great economical damages to an already devastated region.



*EFF trainee Bozidar Bosancic with the police spokesperson in camp Opatovac*

A proof of the excellence of Croatian doctors, medical staff, police, army, volunteers and other involved in the logistics of the crisis, is the fact that there hasn't been one migrant death registered ( by natural or any other cause ), in more than 150 thousand migrants registered in transit so far.

It is very difficult to get official data in regards to the age and gender within the migrant groups, estimates show that the majority of them are up to 30 years of age, with a very small percentage of persons of older age ( above 50 years ) and relatively high number of children up to 16 years of age ( around 15% ). Majority of the migrants are in possession of electronic devices and a certain sum of money, but when asked about the origin of the money or how is it possible to lose a passport but have money with you, one gets no answer.

A report of this type could be updated daily, even hourly, because at this point we do not see the end of the crisis, nor are we informed about the further developments. With a warm welcome and approval of the Croatian police, EFF trainee Bozidar Bosančić and Member of the Croatian Parliament Boro Grubisic were able to visit the places which are mentioned in the report ( migrant camp in Opatovac and eastern borderline).

The migrant camp in Opatovac ( 150 km distance from Slavonski Brod ) is placed 500 metres from the centre of the city of Opatovac at the locality of a former warehouse and has the capacity of 5000 migrants. In order to keep the number of migrants under 5000, it is extremely important to transit them as fast as possible to Hungarian and Slovenian border.

The spokesperson of the Croatian police that welcomed the EFF delegation explained in detail the procedure of welcoming the migrants. In front of the migrant camp there are two tent units that all migrants are obliged to go through, followed by registration and medical check. In one of the tents, the delegation met with dr. Shoukry Nizar, a Croatian of Syrian origin, who has a double roll: that of a doctor of medicine and a translator. At the beginning of the crisis he was welcoming the refugees in Tovarnik, and after the camp was set up, he was transferred to Opatovac. Dr. Nizar has been living in Croatia since 1984, where he finished his medical studies, later married a Croatian and is a father of two daughter. The last 3 years he runs his own dental practice in Tovarnik. He experiences this migrant crisis very emotionally, and he recalled the first situations where he welcomed the migrants in their own language, it was very emotionally for both him and the migrants.

With the approval of the camp police, the EFF delegation spoke with a couple of migrants. In the ambulance they met with a refugee from Alep in Syria with a light hand injury, and this in fact is the most common type of injury the medical staff is faced with, including contusions, scratches and hypothermia.

The spokesperson explained that the migrants rarely stay overnight in the camp but rather just past through the camp ( entrance-exit ) and are escorted to their transfer ( bus or train ).

In the camp the migrants receive lunch packages and are supplied with enough water to continue their travel. The maximum stay of migrants in the camp varies from 36 to 48 hours.

The camp itself consists of 200 tent units, each accommodating 22 persons, for women travelling with small children there are heated mobile homes provided, each accommodating 8 persons. All the signalisation and information panels are written in Croatian, English and Arabic language in order to facilitate to work of many volunteers, international activists, Croatian service staff as well as to provide easy orientation for the thousands of people passing through the camp.

The migrants have at their disposal shower units, and they receive as well all the other necessities ( towels, shampoo and other ).

Before entering buses or trains, a detailed list of passengers is made. On average, out of 55 bus passengers there are 15 to 20 children, 10 to 15 women and all the rest are men.

After the visit to the camp, the EFF delegation visited as well the border crossing Bapska, situated 10 km from the migrant camp. This particular border crossing was closed and out of use for more than 2 years. Suddenly one day, with no previous announcement, the Serbian side started transferring migrants to this border point. This caused many logistical problems, since the border crossing wasn't connected to a source( network) of electric energy. Croatia's officials solved the issue by installing cables from the nearby village and by placing lights on fire trucks. So, a border crossing in the middle of a corn field became a stage of the biggest humanitarian crisis Croatia has seen after its Homeland war 25 years ago.

Police officers are welcoming the migrants at the border crossing, then they escort them to the "check-point", from the border to the check point they walk a path that is lit up by lantern lights. At the check point they are then welcomed by volunteers from different organisations which then provide warm clothes, Halal food, cold and warm beverages and other necessities. All the supplies come mostly from international donations, and just a smaller part are the donations of the Croatian Red Cross. There are many rich Syrians and people of Arab origin living in the EU that are sending supplies to Bapska in order to help in this crisis.

From the check point migrants are transferred by buses to the camp Opatovac. So far there have been no incidents and there is a well organised chain of transport that built trust with the migrants that are calmly taking their place in the queue.

It is expected that Hungary might soon close all its borders with Croatia and the migrants will have to be sent to transit to Slovenia, which might cause



*One of the buses that transfers the migrants further to Slovenian and Hungarian border*

further logistical problems because of the Slovenian capacity to deal with such a number of migrants.

Croatian government announced it will not close any of its borders as long as there is the possibility to transfer the migrants further on the route. But at the same Vesna Pusić, Croatian Minister of Foreign Affairs stated that no possibility is excluded, and that Croatia is just a part of the chain and react according to the developments of the crisis.

The official stand of the Croatian Government at the Council meetings regarding this issue is very strong when it comes to the issue of establishing refugee quota and the so-called hot spots. Croatia is ready to welcome 3000 asylum seekers and refugees ( which might be a problem because the migrants do not see Croatia as their final destination, and nobody has so far explained how will this quota system work in practice ). In regards to the hot spots from which the migrants should be distributed to further and final destinations, it would be illogical to set them up in the EU, and if so, it should be done on the external borders ( Greece) or in the ideal situation in Turkey. Croatia with its neighbouring countries will not accept to become a hotspot and defends this position in a strong alliance with the countries of the region.

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