



LEFT BEHIND IN THE BALKANS
A Cross-Country Analysis of the post-Balkan Route

PART ONE

Written by Francesco Trupia, Edward Crawford, Daniyal Shajar | HOLDS Foundation

Published in Sofia, Bulgaria

This page is intentionally left blank

ABOUT

This paper is the result of research and fieldwork carried out by the HOLDS Foundation in Bulgaria, Northern Greece, Macedonia (FYROM) and Serbia in November 2017 as part of the RefugeelNV project.

HOLDS would like to thank LEGIS, Human Stories, Alkyone Day Center, Refugee Care Center (Thessaloniki), the Norwegian Refugee Council, Lifting Hands International, Help Refugees, BelgrAid, and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies for their contributions and support.

HOLDS Foundation is a charitable organisation founded in March 2017, conducting humanitarian operations for refugees and other victims of war and catastrophe. The Foundation believes humanitarian efforts must be conducted and designed with a mid to long-term scope, as the “emergency relief” scope has proven to be insufficient for addressing migration and displacement phenomena. RefugeelNV (Refugee “Investigate”) aims to investigate and assess the responses to protracted humanitarian, logistics and security issues related to the refugee crisis in Europe, with the objective of improving humanitarian efforts and relevant initiatives.

A supplementary paper (“Part Two”) features images and graphics taken during, and relative to, the research outlined in this paper (“Part One”).

DEFINITIONS

NGO Any non-governmental organisation, including volunteer organisations, grassroots organisations, charitable organisations, and civil society organisations, unless stated otherwise.

SOPs Standard Operating Procedures are step-by-step procedures implemented by organisations to ensure employees maintain the standards and requirements of relevant activities/functions.

IOM International Organisation for Migration

Service provider Refers to an organisation, initiative, project or group which *provides* the logistics, humanitarian, or security service(s) in question.

Service receiver Refers to an organisation, initiative, project or group which *receives* the logistics, humanitarian of security service(s) in question.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After the official blockage of the so-called 'Balkan route' with border closures, Balkan states have since declared the refugee crisis to be over – or at least that the crisis has become a “normalised issue”. In the case of Macedonia (FYROM), at the time of our research there was reportedly only one refugee officially in the country. Despite the political statements publicly expressing the end of the crisis in the Balkans, migratory phenomena are still taking place behind closed doors and without sufficient media coverage. With the deterioration of the humanitarian corridor since the closure of the Balkan route in 2016, the only option now available to many refugees migrating “outside of the system” is at the hands of smugglers. The role and influence of active smugglers has been empowered, with refugees willing to pay massive sums of money out of desperation to reach their destination.

The reality of Transit states becoming Host states has created a severe disconnect in both refugee mentality and state policy. The most succinct manifestation of the impact of this reality is the refugee desire to ‘play the game’ of illegally crossing national borders rather than attempting to settle and accept the country as a destination.¹ Hidden away from the public eye, the situation for some refugees are of protracted homelessness without any possibility for support from the state or realistic pathways for repatriation. These groups of refugees are either unable to submit to asylum procedures out of desperation to reach their destination or have been denied asylum and left with little to no redress. As a result, these refugees, often families including children, are exposed to human rights abuses (e.g. police violence at border checkpoints, racial abuse/harassment, trafficking, sexual abuse and physical assault), criminals, a lack of access to basic rights and living conditions, and genuine risks to their safety and lives.

This cross-country report seeks to bring to light the inhumane conditions under which migrants and refugees are living in the aftermath of the Balkan route closure. Our fieldwork was aimed to firstly analyse and expose the main issues of current refugee conditions across the Balkans, and secondly, to promote the positive aspects of previous and ongoing humanitarian interventions while identifying potential solutions for any inadequacies. Ultimately, this report presents the detrimental impact of the collapse of the Balkan route and the hardships faced by refugees left behind in the region.

Recurring themes encountered over the course of this fieldwork were the impromptu collaboration and cooperation among NGOs, IGOs and authorities, and the inclination for authorities and camp managers to be restrictive in access and discussion regarding issues or their potential solutions at refugee sites. HOLDS strongly asserts that – where there is no threat to the safety or privacy of refugees – there should be absolute visibility and clarity in the operations of a refugee camp to ensure assessments can be made to ensure refugees are adequately supported without exception.

¹ Quoted from an informal interview with Afghani refugees at the Central Railway Station of Belgrade.

METHODOLOGY

The HOLDS research team conducted this cross-country fieldwork in November 2017 using RefugeeINV protocols developed through preliminary fieldwork between March-May 2017. Visiting former and current refugee hotspots, we conducted interviews and discussions with NGO and IGO personnel, as well as government authorities and refugees in Northern region of Greece, Macedonia (FYROM), Serbia and Bulgaria. Our research consisted of a combination of consultation and observation at both the service provider and service receiver levels. This combined approach allows information to be gathered at the service provider and service receiver levels, which provides a complete, organic assessment of the service (e.g. for a warehouse supplying local NGOs with non/food items (NFI), the warehouse, local NGOs, camp manager and refugees will be approached for information on the service).

NORTHERN GREECE

SERRES

Managed by IOM, 385 refugees reside at the camp – 200 of these refugees (52%) are children. The camp houses predominantly Yazidi refugees. Medecins du Monde are believed to be offering medical support on-site.

Camp Management refused to speak to the research team, citing SOPs due to lack of Ministry permission.

Refugees are provided with monthly cash card assistance.

Lifting Hands International provide refugees with fresh produce weekly (approximately €200 worth, though attempts are made to predict and meet refugee needs) and NFI for new arrivals to the camp. Lifting Hands received a small car as a donation, and the vehicle is crucial for their provided services.

While it was clear that a more suitable vehicle would assist Lifting Hands, the most pressing difficulty encountered is the lack of support and coordination offered by the IOM camp management team. Camp management does not allow Lifting Hands to provide services on-site, and refuses to share census information on anticipated arrivals or residents – which would greatly assist the Lifting Hands weekly food donations. As a result, 80 new arrivals were present at the camp at the time of this investigation, and although Lifting Hands were aware of new arrivals and increased the fresh produce budget accordingly, the donations appeared to be insufficient to meet new demand – with Lifting Hands then facing complaints and pleas for more food by the refugees.

Despite this, Lifting Hands continues to expand its facilities – constructing a new space with support from the Get Shit Done Team.

DIAVATA

HOLDS was denied access to the camp by Greek authorities, and so could not communicate with the camp management to acquire official information on the site or census statistics.

Residents are provided with cash cards of 90-150 Euro per person per month (the amount depends on number of family members).

Consulting residents of the camp, several issues were highlighted to the research team:

Firstly, despite the proximity of the large Help Refugees warehouse nearby, all refugees interviewed complained of a lack of adequate clothing for the winter and showed little awareness of any regular deliveries of NFI. This contrasted directly with the account of practices given by the Help Refugees warehouse, and our inability to communicate with camp management prevented a confirmation the true situation. Regardless of this, it is apparent that there is disconnect between the service provider and the refugees receiving the aid.

Secondly, refugees resident at the camp suffer from a combination of health issues. While some complained of the lack of dental healthcare, which is logistically difficult to provide at refugee camps, the issues of mental health and drug abuse were widespread and severe.

Thirdly, while a theatre building was being constructed at the time of research, refugees complained of a general lack of facilities for outdoor activities. With poor weather conditions, the dirt and gravel ground of the camp prevents even basic outdoor activities.

Fourthly, refugees at the camp had been waiting for extended periods of time to be reunited with their families further north. In one case, a young Syrian man was the sole member of his family remaining at the camp, with other family members having been relocated to Germany.

The availability of heroin and hard drugs from criminals and liberal prescription of medication by doctors at the camp, combined with depression and protracted stay in Greece despite wishing to move

north, lead to refugees giving up hope and succumbing to drug abuse.

The Norwegian Refugee Council in Thessaloniki offers language classes and other activities for residents at Diavata. A buss-pass system had also been provided to refugees to journey from the camp to the city, however this support had been withdrawn by the time of this research. More pressingly, refugees show a general disdain for learning Greek, as they have no intention or desire to remain in Greece whatsoever.

Local Greek civil society, such as the Refugee Care Center in Thessaloniki, are aware of the issues at Diavata, and despite being eager to offer support through activities and delivery of aid, they have been denied permission by Greek authorities.

THESSALONIKI

The situation for refugees in Thessaloniki is defined by a desperation to migrate north and a grave lack of long-term support.

A group of 20-30 Pakistani refugees are essentially homeless in the city. The majority have been denied asylum applications yet refuse to repatriate due to the heavy costs their displacement has incurred. Their determination has resulted in the group being shunned by immigration officers and pro-bono lawyers.

The group relies on the Alkyone Day Centre and Soul Food Kitchen for food. Alkyone provides 100 servings a day of vegan dishes, as well as shower facilities, laundry facilities, a warehouse for clothing (40-140 items per month), and immigration advice and assistance. While the consistency and quality of the food provided is commended, refugees expressed a desire to have more than a vegan diet.

For shelter, refugees primarily rely on Praxis. However, the refugees had previously been squatting in an abandoned building for several months before being removed by the police. Similarly, they are prevented from sleeping near the Railway Station and parks by police.

Basic medicines are provided by volunteer groups, offering bandages, paracetamol and other painkillers, but little to no support apart from this. A refugee complained of a worsening sore on their leg and had only received paracetamol as treatment.

Homeless refugees are highly susceptible to criminal activity and exposure to criminals. Due to the Greek government reintroducing academic asylum laws which prevent police presence on academic campuses, criminals have developed a large presence on university sites at odd-hours, with refugees vulnerable to being employed as drug dealers or sellers of other illicit goods.

NEA KAVALA

The camp houses 400 refugees of mainly Eritrean, Congolese and Somalian origin. 20 families reside at the camp.

The security and camp management at the camp were fully cooperative and highly accommodating of our research. Security personnel checked our documentation and then retained our ID documents while inside the camp.

While IFRC are the camp managers, the NGO group Drop In The Ocean has the unique opportunity of maintaining a large warehouse on-site at the camp.

The openness of the camp seemed to be a result of both the energising warehouse model of Drop and the friendliness of IFRC staff with residents. The Drop warehouse system use a digital system of inventory stock and planning, which provides a clear system of preparation of adequate supply to meet the demand of the camp. Further, all residents are provided with “Drops” as a currency to purchase NFI and goods from the Drop Shop. The interactive nature of this warehouse model created a palpable sense of excitement in the refugee community and acts as a social hub of the camp, with residents gathered around the building.

The success of Nea Kavala must be attributed at least in part to the integral presence of Drop on-site. The relationship of the camp manager to the NGO should serve as an archetype for a refugee camp with a positive atmosphere and high refugee support and involvement. The clarity, ease and simplicity of humanitarian activity at the camp stands in stark contrast to Diavata. Even in Serres, should IOM facilitate Lifting Hands as Drop are allowed to operate as in Nea Kavala, it would be to the significant benefit of refugees.

SHARED

Comprehensive information on refugee sites and active organisations is difficult to find online. There is a Google map of refugee sites, though this also contains outdated information. No public database was found with information on active organisations in camps.

Active organisations communicate and coordinate with each other predominantly through social media for informal collaboration and coordination.

The Help Refugees warehouse situated near Thessaloniki is a major hub for NFI distribution, providing aid to any site or organisation in the area which submits a request of goods.

A 'coordination structure' led by Help Refugees exists for the active volunteer community in the region, with attempts to also liaise with the formal sector. Despite any progress and success this structure may have achieved between service providers and receivers, it does not appear to have resolved the severe lack of successful coordination in the region. This was found with refugees in Diavata sharing their continued struggles for adequate food and NFI assistance, and Drop in the Ocean being denied Greek Ministry permission to deliver humanitarian aid to the Lagkadikia refugee site.

MACEDONIA (FYROM)

With the breakdown of the Balkan route, only the Gevgelija (Greek border) and Tabanovce (Serbian border) transit camps remain active in Macedonia. Neither camp hosts a significant refugee population, with only one refugee residing in Tabanovce at the time of research. The camp facilities are essentially empty and currently unused.

The fact that no refugee has started the procedure for seeking asylum in Macedonia is significant. This fact is both facilitated by state policy, and relied upon for justifying Macedonia's role as a transit country and not a destination. Macedonia exists as a "land of passage" between Greece and Serbia, and this is precisely the extent of how the country wishes to participate in the refugee crisis. Macedonia is arguably the only true transit state in Europe, by both refugee perception and its policy. For research purposes, the nature of the country as a transit state is invaluable, as the data on migrants crossing its borders offers insight into the true numbers of the "invisible" refugees who avoid immigration systems and therefore part of the most vulnerable group of refugees in the region.

In Northern Macedonia, refugees tend to bypass the official border checkpoints between Preševo in Serbia and Tabanovce because of their undocumented status, police violence and fear of being pushed back. Our research conducted in the Transit Camp of Tabanovce on 25 November 2017 showed that Serbian police often resort to violence against refugees at the Serbia border checkpoint mainly due to lack of official documents, and, in time, this practice has led to a larger number of refugees avoiding the Serbian-Macedonian checkpoint.

Among other organisations, LEGIS conducts daily fieldwork with its mobile team deployed in the village of Lojane. While the camp at Tabanovce provides shelter and recreational activities for any arriving refugees, the mobile team in Lojane functions as a first aid point for refugees bypassing the Serbian border security by crossing the mountainous region near the village.

The Lojane mobile team showed data indicating that a large number of families and unaccompanied minors migrate along the route. The majority of arrivals are of Pakistani, Afghani and Syrian origin, mostly arriving from Thessaloniki. In November-December 2016, the mobile team recorded 700 refugees passing through Lojane, and this is just the number of refugees found by the team covering a 2km area by foot, and during the day – when most refugees are thought to cross the border by night. With the number of refugees at the time of research said to be matching that of 2016, it is clear that a significant population of refugees continues to migrate north from Greece.

SERBIA

Overall, there are three common refugee circumstances in Serbia: a) refugees who refuse to register into the Serbian immigration system due to their desire to migrate north or fear of pushback; b) refugees registered and residing in official refugee camps; c) groups of refugees that reside in official camps periodically, but leave to 'play the game' in an attempt to leave Serbia illegally.

The closure of Serbian borders has resulted in a large police force at the border which physically intimidates and assaults any refugee attempting to cross the border illegally. With the border restrictions making illegal border crossings increasingly difficult, smugglers and traffickers can charge refugees incredibly high charges without reproach. Afghan and Pakistani refugees represent the most exposed group to risks and threats because of their unaccompanied, undocumented and unreported status. In addition, they have no chance to get successfully asylum and, if registered in another country, they cannot do anything besides trying to illegally leave the country for another one.

ADAŠEVCI

While the population fluctuates as the camp is used as a hub for people attempting to cross the Croatian border from Šid, there are around 400 residents, with a roughly even split of single men and families. Capacity for 500 refugees after construction work is completed.

The majority of residents are of Pakistani, Afghan, Iraqi, Syrian and Iranian origin.

The NGO OM provides a tea tent encouraging social cohesion.

BUJANOVAC

Former car battery factory. Renovated October 2016.

239 residents at the time of research, only 7 of which were single men, and the remainder being families. Capacity of 250 refugees.

Facilities include a football pitch, volley ball pitch, basketball court.

The camp is on an industrial estate with easy access to the town.

Residents reported a need for winter coats.

KRNJAČA

Former military base. 18 barracks buildings (2 not for living). Built in 1990's and renovated from 2015-present.

More than 1,000 refugees are resident at the camp, with 580 single men, 140 unaccompanied minors, and the remainder being families. Capacity of 1,200 refugees.

Accommodation is segregated into families, unaccompanied minors, and single men, respectively – separated by nationality if possible.

Facilities include shop, food distribution for unregistered people.

Number of interactive activities including wood work, electrical circuiting and practical skills classes.

The camp is located next to a large Roma population, with possible conflict between the residents and Roma. Sexually transmitted diseases along with prostitution in the area pose a significant health threat.

OBRENOVAC

Former refugee accommodation and military base. Several small buildings and one large building with living accommodation on the top floor and social areas on ground floor. Built in 1992 and renovated from 2015-present.

More than 700 refugees reside at the camp. 400 single men, remainder families. Refugees are of Pakistani, Afghan, Iraqi, Syrian, Iranian, Nigerian and Indian in origin. Capacity for 800 refugees (building under construction).

Pakistani and Afghan refugees shared mixed accommodation, which has led to some issues between the groups and Afghans being accused of forming gangs and committing knife violence.

BelgrAid distribute vegan food to the camp, as well as providing NFI if necessary.

Football pitch, large shower facilities, weekly laundry of bedding.

VRANJE

Former hotel. Each room has a shower, toilet and balcony.

Predominantly houses families, with 108 refugees of which 58 are children, and 4 are single men. Capacity of 120.

The camp is on the outskirts of the town with easy access to nearby supermarkets and bus station.

BELGRADE

In comparison to the situation of refugees HOLDS reported in May 2017, the problems faced by refugees in Belgrade were much less visible. However, this does not mean that problems do not persist in the city.

Conducting an interview with the NGOs Info Park and the International Rescue Committee, we learnt it was known that a group of 70-100 Pakistani refugees were homeless in the city.

Refugees agreed to show us the abandoned building where all 70-100 refugees have been squatting since October 2017 to escape the winter weather, and a strong odour of urine indicated the refugees had no toilet facilities at the building.

During our visit, Serbian police raided the building and forcefully evacuated the ground floor – not realising that the upper floors also houses large numbers of refugees.

With the Serbian government actively preventing NGOs and the public from assisting refugees “outside of the system” in an effort to combat illegal immigration, the result of this policy has left refugees such as this group with no options to progress and little respite save for limited charity support and squatting in an abandoned building when possible.

SHARED

Psychological treatment or assistance is available from the Commissariat psychologist.

Facilities include children’s play area, internet room, social room (single men) beauty salon/barber shop, language teaching rooms (various age groups), art room, prayer facilities.

BULGARIA

Despite being granted permission by the State Agency for Refugees in May 2017 to conduct fieldwork at the open refugee centres in Harmanli and Sofia, in this instance the State Agency denied permission for any access in visiting the Voanna Rampa, Ovcha Kupel, Vredhzebna refugee centres located in Sofia.² While the Minister of Interior (Migration Directorate of the Republic of Bulgaria) also denied permission to visit the Busmansti detention camp due to security issues, a letter from the State Agency for Refugees on 28 November 2017 failed to highlight the motivation behind its refusal.³ ⁴ The latter was sent a day after our scheduled first visit to the open refugee camps in Sofia. Although HOLDS requested permission from State Agency two weeks in advance and provided all required information about the visit, we were unable to visit any of the refugee sites in Sofia. In order to understand the motivations that prevented the State Agency from granting access on this occasion, HOLDS has attempted to contact the State Agency twice (on 1st December 2017 and 14th December 2017) without receiving any official reply.

In comparison with the results regarding logistics, humanitarian issues and related concerns after the fieldwork and secondary (desk) research conducted between May and September 2017, the overall conditions of refugees and migrants in Bulgaria does not seem to have changed significantly. However, the constant presence of smugglers around the open refugee camps and ongoing human trafficking are currently impinging the Bulgarian context from within, with refugees increasingly migrating to Serbia.

During HOLDS fieldwork, on 22 November the HOLDS Research Team was informed of the tragic death of Madina Husein, a 6-year old Afghani refugee who died while attempting to illegally cross the Serbo-Croatian border near the border Serbia town of Sid. Due to unpleasant weather conditions and the Serbian and Croatian police's pushbacks, she was accidentally hit by a passing freight train on 21 November at around 6 pm (17:00 GMT). The Husein family had begun its journey across the Balkan region by staying in Bulgaria for a couple of months at the open refugee camp of Voanna Rampa (Sofia, Bulgaria) before heading to Serbia on their journey north.

According to short interviews conducted with residents of open refugee centres in Sofia, smugglers maintain contact with small groups or individuals of the Bulgarian/Serbian border police, where bribes (of approximately 200-300 Euro per person) are required to acquire "permission" for refugees to cross the border.⁵ Refugees are aware of the serious risks of being discovered by police and subsequent pushback and physical violence, yet continue to pursue the journey north despite these risks and

² Official Document N° BO-123/25.05.2017

³ Official Document N° 53643-2231/13.11.2017

⁴ Official Document N° BO-210/1/28/28.11.2017

⁵ Quoted from informal interviews with refugees nearby the open refugee centre of Ovcha Kupel in Sofia, Bulgaria.

tragedies such as the death of Madina Husein. For refugees who do successfully reach, register and settle in Serbia from Bulgaria, the conditions for accommodation and other provisions are reported to be 'better in Serbia than in Bulgaria' – which is consistent with our findings in this report and our previous report.

To summarise, the lack of transparency in the Bulgarian bureaucracy and prevalence of smuggling networks and related human rights abuses (i.e. human trafficking, poor living condition at the refugee centres, lack of inclusion and integration plans) pose significant issues in the Bulgarian refugee response as it continues its EU Presidency which began in January 2018.⁶

⁶ RefugeeINV Field Report: Bulgaria (October 2017) <<http://holdsfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/RefugeeINVReport-Bulgaria-Oct-2017.pdf>>