

# REFUGEE CRISIS IN CROATIA – REPORT

Tajana Sisgoreo, June 2016

Flows of forced migration, which mainly went so far through the Central Mediterranean route, were diverted in 2015 to the East and the Balkans route which included Croatia. Croatia became a transit country to the people, mostly from the main war-affected areas, on their way to Western EU countries. During the time of the so-called "refugee crisis" more than 800,000 people passed through Croatia. In this period there were two refugee camps and the government provided free transport to Hungary and later to Slovenia.

## Chronology of the refugee crisis in Croatia

On 16<sup>th</sup> of September 2015 Croatia became one of the main transit countries for refugees. (about 12 000 entries per day)

Croatia became a transit country for refugees on their way to Western EU countries after Serbian government decided to redirect the wave of refugees to Croatia due to complete closure of the border between Hungary and Serbia. Furthermore, redirecting refugees to the neighboring countries depended on Austria and Germany and their open policy. This development resulted in raised tensions with the neighboring countries - blocked traffic between Croatia and Serbia, as well as Hungary and Slovenia placing barbed wire on their borders .

In the first weeks of the crisis, the largest inflow in Croatia was in the area of **Tovarnik, Ilok, Strošinci and Bapska**, while some of the people were placed in a **temporary shelter in Opatovac**, from where they were transported through Hungary and Slovenia and later to developed European countries, mostly to Germany.

The Prime Minister of Croatia Zoran Milanovic insisted on keeping Croatian borders open to refugees, but stressed that Croatia would not become a hot-spot (a kind of a reception center), from which people were deployed to the EU countries. Croatia's policy was to let people into the country, take care of the sick and inform them and then transport them to the borders with Hungary and Slovenia.

**Opatovac camp** wasn't equipped for accommodating persons for the period over 24 hours. At the beginning, high numbers of daily arrivals resulted in the camp being overcrowded. There were cases when people were literally sleeping in the mud. Conditions got worse due to severely cold weather. The camp in Opatovac was divided into four sectors: red, yellow, green and blue sector. There were tents where the headquarters of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Croatian Red Cross, Headquarters of the state authorities were situated, tents for international agencies, NGO tents and a kitchen, and some tents were used for medical triage.



Opatovac Camp, photo by Ivana Živković

Except Opatovac, at the beginning refugees were accommodated in Ježevo reception center, Čepin, Hotel Porin in Zagreb, the Zagreb Fair, Sisak, Luč (Beli Manastir).

**In Bapska**, at the Croatian-Serbian border, where the refugees spent the whole night waiting for the borders to open, independent volunteers from all over Europe and local residents from surrounding villages set up their stalls with food, water and clothing. They provided help to up to several thousand refugees a night. Mostly large organizations were present in Opatovac and provided assistance to people and oversaw police work and the registration process.

Locals helping refugees in Bapska, photo by Branimir Bradarić





Independent volunteers in Bapska, photo by Tinka Kalajžić

On 16 October at midnight, **Hungary closed all 'green borders'** and enforced Schengen rules in relation to border crossings from Croatia. Since Hungary effectively closed its border, the movement of people was redirected by the Croatian authorities towards Slovenian border crossings of Banfi, Macelj, Mursko Središće, Trnovec and Bregana. Slovenian authorities were transferring people to the Austrian border. At one moment Slovenian authorities announced a limit of 2,500 people per day and average number of people crossing from Serbia to Croatia was around 5,000 people per day. That led to thousands of people having to wait in buses for hours in the cold. The border crossing that was most affected by the migration flow was in Bapska, where the majority of new arrivals crossed the border, as well as Tovarnik and Opatovac camps where people were registered.



People stuck at the Slovenian border, photo by Tinka Kalajžić

Furthermore, the biggest problem was the lack of communication and coordination among countries related to the organization of the flow of asylum seekers and refugees along the Balkan route. This resulted in holding people at border crossings without appropriate protection from weather conditions and with insufficient amount of food, water and health assistance.

On 19 and 20 October 2015, people were no longer transported from Bapska at the Serbian border to Opatovac camp due to high numbers of new arrivals. People had to walk for almost 15km and a lot of them were completely wet because of the rain. There were also cases when people were trapped between two countries with no shelter or humanitarian assistance. Finally, on 27 October, the transportation was reorganized and only trains were taking people from Tovarnik train station straight to Dobova.



People stuck in the field in Slovenia, photo by Darko Bandić

From 2 November people were transferred to **Slavonski Brod**, a new camp that was built with better conditions for accommodating people. The winter temporary reception camp in Slavonski Brod, located in the eastern part of Croatia, could accommodate up to 5,000 people. The whole camp was covered with video cameras. There was also a video wall with the most important information in Arabic, Farsi and English. Each of the sectors in which the refugees stayed had containers for clothes, food, medical assistance for vulnerable groups and assistance in searching for missing / lost family members. The camp was the best-equipped and organized camp along the Balkan Route. The only problem was that the police insisted on the rapid passage of refugees, so volunteers often didn't have time to provide help to vulnerable groups. Refugees were directly transported from the Serbian side of the border (Šid) to Slavonski Brod camp by train and then directly to the Slovenian border (Dobova), also by train. The transportation of people from Slavonski Brod to Slovenia (Dobova border crossing) was organized every few hours.

The Slovenian army continued setting up barbed wire on the border with Croatia, although there were no irregular border crossings. Animals were suffering because of the wire and citizens living along both sides of the border protested.

The new practice of **differentiating people from “war affected areas” and people from “non-war zones”** appear in the countries along the Balkan route. People who could not show that they were of Syrian, Afghan or Iraqi nationality were pushed back to countries where they had registered before.



photo by Borna Filić

The Croatian Minister of Interior started tightening the criteria for admitting people from countries “not affected by war”. These people were considered “economic migrants”. Croatian police prevented them in Šid, Serbia from entering trains to Croatia. This became increasingly unacceptable from many standpoints – humanitarian, legal and also safety-related reasons and posed a risk for children, the elderly and other groups with specific needs.

Following the Croatian parliamentary elections on 8 November 2015, a new right – wing government was established in January 2016. The new government was composed of the Patriotic Coalition (Domoljubna koalicija), organized around the Croatian Democratic Party (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica, HDZ), forming the government majority and the political party called Bridge (MOST). Public statements issued by certain members of the Croatian Democratic Party created an atmosphere of intolerance.

In later months, there was an increase in the number of vulnerable groups, especially children, women and the sick. The persons who arrived were exclusively Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan. They were arriving in waves: at times only men, and sometimes families with children.

Starting with 21 February, **only Iraqi and Syrian nationals** who presented proof that they underwent registration in Serbia were allowed to enter Croatia using official transport. Afghan nationals, who were allowed to enter the county prior to that date, were denied entry already at the Macedonian border, but also in Šid. Persons who attempted to enter Croatia irregularly were subjected to standard procedure. That means that their compliance with entry conditions is checked, as provided by the Law on Foreigners. In cases of irregular entry, they can be charged, unless they seek asylum. Such new arrivals are transferred to the detention center in Ježevo.

People who were sent back from Slovenia were placed in **Slavonski Brod camp, sector 3**, which was a secluded sector. Only the Croatian Red Cross had access to provide food, water and hygienic

supplies. Within the Third sector some people were detained for more than three weeks without any information about their future. After the routes were closed, people from the Third sector were deployed through Croatian reception centers.

The closure of the Balkan route was officially announced in the evening of the 8 March 2016, and the **Croatian Border was closed on 9 March 2016.**

On 9 March 2016, all new arrivals from sectors 3 and 4 (returnees from Slovenia) were registered again and given orders to leave the European Economic Area within 30 days or seek asylum in Croatia (in the meantime they were not allowed to leave the camp).

## Stakeholders

- UNICEF, country office, based in Zagreb
- Ministry of Interior, Head of department for illegal migration
- Ministry of the Social Policy and Youth, Minister's cabinet
- People's Ombudsman's Office, National Preventive Mechanism
- Ombudsperson for children of the Republic of Croatia
- Croatian Legal Centre, an NGO based in Zagreb
- Croatian Red Cross
- Are You Syrious?
- Centre for Peace Studies
- Welcome Initiative
- Society for Psychological Assistance, an NGO
- Jesuit Refugee Service, an NGO
- African Society in Croatia

At the very beginning of the crisis people were placed in various locations. The flow of people was not regulated by the police and people were in the fields, along the borders and places that were located along the border. Big organizations, such as the Red Cross, failed to provide urgent assistance due to their structure with a strict hierarchy. Therefore, ordinary citizens and individual volunteers from all over Europe played an important role throughout the crisis. People outside the organization proved to be much more agile in the management and providing direct help that was necessary in that moment.

Here will be described the two organizations that have been active since the beginning of the crisis in Croatia; **Welcome Initiative**, consisting of various civil society organizations in Croatia and **Are You Syrious?**, an organization that grew out of independent citizen initiatives.

### “Welcome Initiative”



“Welcome initiative” gathers individuals and civil society organizations with the aim to support refugees on the ground, but also to make political pressure on the Croatian and EU institutions to change restrictive migration policies.

Initiative gathers more than 60 civil society organizations, one football club and more than 400 volunteers who give support to the refugees on the ground on everyday basis – from humanitarian support and coordination with local organizations, but also providing information to refugees about current procedures regarding entering and leaving Croatia. On the ground, initiative is also working in coordination with Croatian Red Cross, the Coordination for asylum and institutions as well.

In order to improve communication with the public, they launched a website - [welcome.cms.hr](http://welcome.cms.hr) - with updated news from the field and useful information for refugees, such as timetables and dictionaries.

### “Are You Syrious?”



“Are You Syrious?” is an initiative that was created during the crisis, and it gathers ordinary citizens who decided to help in providing direct humanitarian aid on the field to the refugees from the first day they enter Croatia. Volunteers were present mostly on the field at non- structured locations and

outside the camps. The initiative operates entirely on voluntary basis and the first months of the crisis were working on the field and now works mostly through social networks (Facebook groups).

At one moment there were more than 100 active volunteers in Croatia and abroad, who were part of the Are You Syrious? initiative. Very diversified structure of volunteer body brings diversified competencies and social capital – international, multilingual (including Arabic speakers) volunteers of different professional profiles – students, educators, artists, business people, professional journalists, writers, shipping agents, ex-members of international organizations and government, legal experts, unemployed people, translators, HR activists and CSO representatives.

Are You Syrious? has an organized and flexible structure consisting of active coordination groups: donation, field, coordination of Volunteers, organizing warehouse, providing information and sensitization of the public through Facebook...

One of the most important activities is providing information to the public through daily digest, reliable source for the international volunteers, refugees, public, politicians and journalist. News cover what's going on from Middle East and Balkan Route to EU and Arctic, changes in the procedures in countries or weather forecast at the Aegean Sea. Prevalently first hand (around 70% information), double-checked information come from volunteers and refugees. The digest reaches up to more than 100.000 people a day.



Are you Syrious? volunteers preparing a truck full of help for Greece, photo by Luka Juranić

## **Social response to the situation**

At the very beginning of the crisis, general opinion and the national media were supporting a humanitarian approach and the government's efforts that refugees get proper assistance upon arrival. There was no record of organized rallies or other types of public protests against refugees.

Before the route was diverted to Croatia, the general public in Croatia was shocked by a bad treatment of refugees in Serbia and Hungary, which could be seen in the media. Humanitarian approach to the refugees was largely motivated by the fact that Croatian people had refugee experience while in exile during the war with the neighboring Serbia in the 1990s. Places along the border through which the refugees passed at the beginning of the crisis were the first places where the population had to leave their homes during the war. This resulted in great empathy by the local population. Many locals were directly involved in the provision of humanitarian assistance in the field by opening their homes to refugees and giving them food. This was particularly the case at the very beginning of the crisis during the time the state did not manage to deal with the situation.

In Croatia, in the first few months of the refugee crisis there was a pre-election campaign. In the pre-election debate some political parties were raising negative sentiments towards the refugees. They were emphasising the number of refugees and the negative consequences of the huge influx in relation to national security and national/ cultural identity issues.

On 31 October in Zagreb, a self-organized initiative "Migrations Without Borders" organized a demonstration of support and solidarity with refugees and against closing the EU borders and repressive measures toward persons in need of international protection.

On 14 November, the "Welcome Initiative" and Young Antifascist of Zagreb City have organized a Solidarity March with refugees in Zagreb. There were around 1,000 citizens who joined the march and all the main media covered the event.

The "Welcome Initiative" and the "Are You Serious?" initiative attracted around 500 people to the protest "Closing of Borders Kills" held on 11 March 2016 in Zagreb against the closing of the so-called Balkan Route, which has left more than 40,000 people trapped at the Greek border.



Photo by Goran Mehkek

*“There is another kind of Europe that refuses to watch embarrassing historical episodes repeat themselves on its territory. This Europe has been correcting different countries oversights for months by showing compassion and solidarity.”* said one of the speakers at the protest.

On 16 March 2016, the “Welcome Initiative” and the Are You Serious? initiative held a press conference presenting a report on the systematic human rights violations by Croatian authorities in the closed parts of the winter reception center and the transit center in Slavonski Brod.

Link to Report on Systemic Human Rights Violations by Croatian Authorities in the Closed Parts of the Winter Reception and Transit Centre in Slavonski Brod:

<http://welcome.cms.hr/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Report-on-Systemic-Human-Rights-Violations-in-the-Winter-Reception-and-Transit-Centre-in-Slavonski-Brod.pdf>

## **Refugees in Croatia today**

The first refugees that Croatia is going to receive in accordance with the model resettlement of persons who meet the requirements for the approval of international protection are going to arrive in Croatia in July this year, 30 of them from Turkey, 10 from Italy and 10 from Greece. These persons should be located in Zagreb, Rijeka and Split. Croatia should receive 1,617 people by the end of 2017, and 84 people a month from July 2016 until December 2017.

There are also cases of refugees being sent back to Croatia from other countries of the European Union based on the Dublin Regulation. At the same time, there are people who voluntarily leave the shelter Porin and Croatia and return back to their country or find some ways to continue their journey to Western countries.

After the closing of the Slavonski Brod camp, refugees who were moved to **closed detention center Ježevo** are currently facing the worst situation. These refugees are systematically discriminated based on gender and marital status. Organizations are fighting against this discriminatory decision and they want to ensure free movement of persons, which is the case in the Porin reception center. Croatian government did not provide them with the same conditions as other refugees, since they are located in a closed detention center that has the infrastructure and functional characteristics of a prison. The media are not allowed to enter the center and in such a manner it seriously endangers the right of the public to have information about the position and conditions of migrants who live there.

In the **Porin shelter for asylum seekers** there are asylum seekers, mostly families, women and children. In cooperation with other organizations, the new manager of the shelter is planning to make it the best in the region and make it a home for the people currently living there. She welcomed many initiatives that were organized by "Are You Syrious?" so these days workers in the shelter are improving infrastructural conditions, volunteers are providing Croatian and English language courses, asylum seekers and volunteers are creating gardens... Despite the efforts of organizations that have in recent years invested in providing free public transport to asylum seekers, the City of Zagreb still has not solved this problem, making it difficult for refugees to move around the city, as well as making the process of adequate integration more complicated.

This month the organization "Are You Syrious?" took asylum seekers on a trip to the countryside, children visited the zoo and adults went to a concert. These activities contribute to successful integration and raise public awareness. Croatian government has not done a lot in order to implement integration programmes. It is the activists who contribute to successful integration and raising public awareness. It is necessary that such activities are carried out by the government or the authorities. They need to provide financial help to such organizations, since volunteer work in these kinds of activities is not sustainable in the long run. The laws have so far been harmonized with the European Union, but there has been no integration policy.



Asylum seekers at a concert, photo by "Are You Syrious?"



Children at the Zoo, photo by "Are You Syrious?"