
LESSONS FROM VUČJAK MIGRANT CAMP IN BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA

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Over the past few weeks, the terrible humanitarian situation faced by migrants in Bosnia and Herzegovina has finally gained much welcome media and political attention in Brussels and across Europe.

There is of course more than one reason behind this humanitarian emergency, and we shouldn't undermine the role played by the complex geopolitics of this region.

However, in 2019 Bosnia and Herzegovina has clearly become a key transit country for migrants heading towards the EU.

For us, this scenario is a sign that the EU has yet to apply learnings from the challenging migration situation that developed in the Balkans following the implementation of the EU-Turkey statement.

As the negotiations around the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework (MFF) continue, we hope that the EU will seize this opportunity to ensure that future financial instruments are shaped so that the humanitarian consequences of current EU migration management priorities in the region can be adequately addressed.

Vučjak camp

Last week, the Vučjak camp in northwest Bosnia and Herzegovina was finally closed.

Termed "The Jungle" by people who were living there, the camp had no running water, no electricity, no usable toilets, and mouldy, leaking, and overcrowded tents.

No medical assistance was available for the up to 1,000 people, housed in just 80 tents. In recent months, volunteers from the Red Cross Society of Bosnia and Herzegovina have been working tirelessly to do all they can to help the camp population.

The Red Cross has been calling for the closure of the camp and we very much welcome this development.

However, the outlook for migrants in the rest of the country remains precarious. A location for a

new camp has finally been agreed, but the clock is ticking as winter sets in.

The majority of Vučjak evacuees did not want to be relocated to the new site, which is further away from the Croatian border.

Despite the alleged closure of the Balkan route, migrants take more and more risks to pursue their journeys to the EU. As the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina illustrates, in practice they are increasingly stranded in transit regions, where support structures tend to be limited.

According to UNHCR estimates, there are currently 7,000 migrants in Bosnia and Herzegovina. But while these numbers provide an indication, they do not reflect the actual situation, as flows fluctuate, and many migrants remain unregistered.

In our experience, people often prefer to remain underground as they fear that registering would prevent them from moving on.

The Red Cross is present throughout the Balkan route, actively responding to help address the needs of people on the move.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, we are working with other organisations to ensure people have access to basic food, water and shelter, as well as to first aid and psychological support.

We also plan to assist the local population, which was already vulnerable before this migration crisis. The extra numbers have put additional pressure on services, land, and property.

From our perspective, the way in which the EU's current migration priorities are implemented in the region is contributing to enhanced vulnerabilities.

The EU's approach in neighbouring countries is guided by efforts to better manage migration and border controls, and to increase access to protection in the region – priorities which are reflected in the proposed future EU budget.

While we acknowledge the need to reinforce the capacities of third countries to address migration, we are concerned by a seemingly disproportionate focus on preventing arrivals to the EU.

This has the effect of limiting the scope for needs-based interventions; narrowing the space for humanitarian actors to act. Increasingly, those who seek to help while utilising EU funding risk being associated to the EU's migration control agenda.

When humanitarian actors are perceived to operate based on a political agenda, rather than responding wherever there is actual need, the trust needed to access people in vulnerable situations is lost.

As the intended destination of many of these migrants, the EU should play a bigger role in addressing their needs.

The MFF could be instrumental in supporting migrants and host communities, both in the EU and along the migratory trails to Europe.

It should clearly aim to address the needs and vulnerabilities of migrants and local communities in full respect of human rights and should not be framed as a tool to reward countries which collaborate in migration control.

Importantly, the future MFF ought to allow for principled funding to remain available for humanitarian activities across the globe.

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