
Balkan route: more than two hundred minors travel alone. Migrant children's hardships while waiting to play “the border crossing game”

They are hard to distinguish because they are often mistaken for adults. Yet of the 8,000 migrants blocked on the Balkan route in Bosnia, over two hundred are minors who travel alone, on foot, in an attempt to enter Europe via the dangerous "border crossing game." Youths aged between 14 and 17 from Afghanistan, Syria, Iran, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Iraq face daunting and inhuman challenges that no child should experience at that age. Some of them are stranded in the infamous and ice-cold Lipa camp in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with "no officially-registered minors." They took shelter also in squats (derelict buildings) in the nearby town of Bihac. Forced to live in tents or in dilapidated buildings at temperatures of minus 10 degrees Celsius, without heating, water, amongst filth and disease. They survive only thanks to the food parcels, blankets and sleeping bags donated by humanitarian organisations. These include the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS). Father **Stanko Perica**, Croatian, serves as JRS director general for Southeast Europe. His work spans Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia and Kosovo. At the moment he is in Bihac, Bosnia, with some twenty cultural mediators in two camps for migrants and families, handing out aids to children in squats. JRS is also operating in Sarajevo, but its flagship project is in Belgrade, Serbia: a Home for 15 unaccompanied migrant children, with a view to their legal integration into society.



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In Bihac, children walk around the city with adults at daytime, but at night they return to sleep in derelict buildings. "Yesterday I met a group of 16-year-olds in a squat, four of them packed in one room - Father Perica told SIR - They are living in a former nursing home, without windows and doors, only partition walls. It's a rundown open building, and it gets extremely cold. Each room is occupied by a small group of migrants.

They try to keep warm by burning plastic bottles. Inside there is thick smoke and a very bad smell. On that fire, they cook donated foodstuffs.

There is no water, no way to wash themselves. They sleep on worn-out mattresses or in small tents." The children are grateful for the help they have received but they don't talk much. "They are aware of the situation and of the challenges involved", added the Jesuit priest. " There is no shortage of warm clothes, sleeping bags and food. What is missing is dignity and a decent home, access to a shower, a change of clothes and to legal health care." Fortunately, very few cases of COVID-19 have been reported among the migrants.



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to attempt the Croatian "border crossing game" again, at the risk of violence, physical abuse and refoulement. Sixty per cent rely on traffickers. Those who pay the most money are promised entry into Germany, the poorest into Croatia. Forty per cent of these migrants walk alone, in the woods, facing countless dangers. Unfortunately, they rarely succeed", confirms Father Perica.

"They return with serious injuries and describe the abuses they underwent."

Some of the migrants stationed in the camps have been denied entry ten or twenty times, and thus remain there for two to three years. They have no more money and no energies left to try again. Bosnian citizens, exasperated by the situation, have turned hostile to migrants and regard minors with disdain. It is largely believed that they are lying about their real age. "They all say their name is Mohammed Ali and that they are 16-years-old", is the general impression. They are undocumented, thus the lack of age recognition procedures, that would ensure the activation of specific protection measures for minors, is a major problem - in Italy, for example, a wrist X-ray is taken. "They should receive rightful assistance as provided for to children in Western countries." **The dream: a Home for unaccompanied children in Bihac.** The priest's dream is to create one or more Unaccompanied Migrant Children Shelters in Bihac, although in Bosnia there are greater difficulties than in Serbia. "It would require long-term financial support, which we currently lack," he said, "as well as political determination." In those areas, JRS is not receiving government or EU funding: "We are constantly seeking private donors, embassies, ecclesial organisations". **"Pedro Arrupe" House in Serbia.** The Jesuit service in Belgrade has been sheltering up to 15 unaccompanied minors in the Pedro Arrupe House for the past two years. Many were separated from their parents during the journey, others departed alone. This facility attends to their needs on a 24-hour basis with the support of social workers, psychologists and cultural mediators. The children go to school, learn the Serbian language. "Giving them information on where they are and offering guidance is the most useful and important thing," said Father Perica. "Normally, relatives and friends in Europe invite them to join them and continue their journey on foot into Bosnia, then Croatia and Italy. But we advise them to remain in Serbia and find a legal way to reunite with their families.

We do our best to protect them. But some leave the House without a word."

Some success stories nonetheless. An Afghan boy with an artistic talent is currently attending Art School. Others fall in love, make friends at school and decide to stay. They can receive more or less

cost-free medical care in Serbia, although a residence permit is not easy to obtain - evidence of years-long residence is required. **The walls of Europe.** During the Angelus prayer on 7 February, Pope Francis raised an appeal for unaccompanied migrant children, especially those on the Balkan route: "Let us ensure that these fragile and defenceless creatures do not lack proper care and preferential humanitarian channels". "We are initially touched by humanitarian crises, then we become indifferent," commented Father Perica, "which is why the Pope's appeals are of great value, because they are reminders of the facts. Europe should be ashamed to act in a manner contrary to European values, marked by lofty cultural norms. Unfortunately, the EU is only raising walls."

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