

Torture, Covid-19 and border pushbacks: Stories of migration to Europe at the time of Covid-19



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Funded by: The Journalism Fund

Story of a pushback: from Italy to Bosnia

On the 13th of April this year, Italy's Coronavirus death-toll [surpassed 20,000](#), making worldwide headlines. In the afternoon of the same day, Saeed carefully packed his bag. A phone, three power banks, cigarettes, a sleeping bag and a photograph of his two children back in Pakistan.

During the March lockdown Saeed was forcibly held in Lipa's camp for migrants and asylum seekers, in the Bosnian canton of Una Sana, right next to the Croatian border. Having travelled this far, he was ready for the final leg of his journey to Europe.

That night Saeed left the camp. On the way to the Croatian border, he was joined by nine other men.



People on the move use GPS tracking systems to cross land borders far away from main roads and inhabited locations.

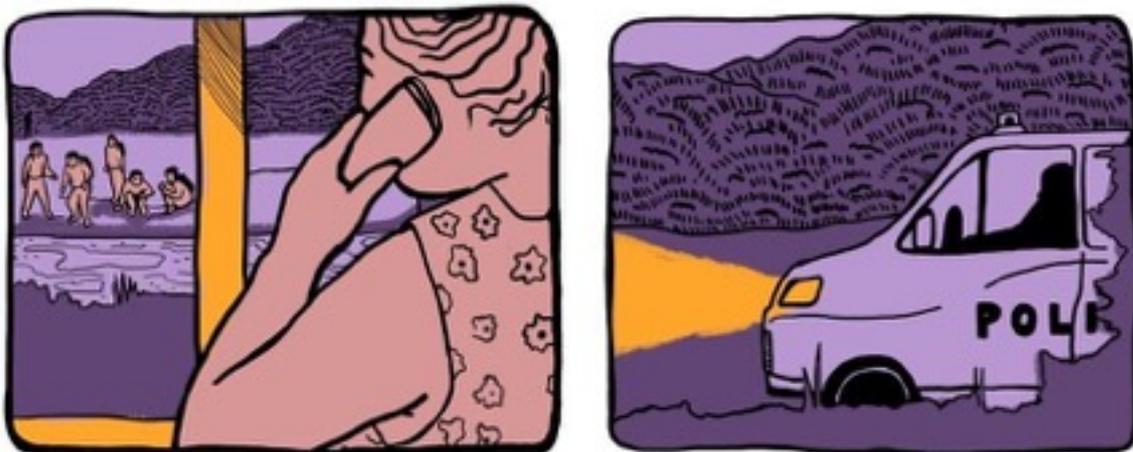
For 21 days the group walked through woods and mountains through Croatia, Slovenia and into Italy, avoiding roads and towns, always careful not to be seen. Never taking their shoes off, not even to sleep.

At times of high Covid-19 contagion during the spring of 2020, EU member states have [increased border security](#) by sending the army to patrol borders and suspending freedom of movement as a measure to prevent the spread of the virus.

This greatly affected migration, giving migrants and asylum seekers another reason to go into hiding. Saeed and his companions knew this well. But as they finally crossed the last border into Italy, they thought the worst was over.

Winding their way down the mountains, the group stopped at the border town of Bagnoli to order a dark sweet coffee. A small reward. Across the street, a woman looked out her window and reached for the phone. The police arrived minutes later.

As the police later confirmed, it is thanks to the calls of local inhabitants living in border areas that most migrants are intercepted by the authorities.



Some of the tracking of irregular border crossings are done by the local population warning border police forces.

Hoisted on an Italian police van, Saeed and his acquaintances were handed over to Slovenian officials, and driven back to the Croatian border with Bosnia in less than 24 hours. No anti-Covid precaution was taken, and their requests for asylum were ignored.

When the van finally stopped, they were released into an open field by a river bank. Plain clothes officers speaking Croatian ordered them to take off their clothes.

Blisters opened as Saeed's skin tore off with his shoes. Two of the men were beaten with telescope batons. Another was whipped with a piece of rope tied to a branch. "Go back to Bosnia" was the last thing they heard those Croatian officers shout as they climbed back up the Bosnian bank of the river.

On the morning of May the 7th, Saeed walked back barefooted to the same Bosnian camp he had left three weeks before. This was his first pushback.

The 'Game' on the Balkan route

Since the start of the pandemic, the EU border agency Frontex reported a decrease in the overall number of irregular border crossings into Europe. This has been the case on all main routes to Europe aside from one: the Balkan route, a route migrants and asylum seekers take by foot to cross from Turkey into central Europe.

On the 10th of July, two months after that first pushback from Italy, Saeed is sitting in Piazza Libertà, the main square in front of Trieste's train station.

Young men from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Eritrea, Iraq and Syria sit with him on the square's benches, forming small groups in the setting sun. For nearly two years now, this square has been the meeting point for 'people on the move', migrants and asylum seekers escaping war, famine and poverty in their countries, arriving by foot from Turkey and through the Balkans.

They sit in Piazza Libertà waiting for the arrival of a group of volunteers, who everyday hand out food, medication and attend to the blisters and welts many have on their feet as a result from the long weeks of restless walking.

73%
rise in irregular border crossings in the Balkans in the first six months of 2020 (FRONTEX)



Piazza Libertà in Trieste. At 6 PM every day, volunteers and doctors provide medical aid to people who have just finished 'the Game' walking from the camps in Bosnia to Italy.

Saeed is in his thirties, clean shaven and dressed in fashion-torn jeans with impeccably white trainers. He would look like any other tourist if it wasn't for the scars crossing his arms.

"There are two borders that are particularly difficult to cross to reach Europe", he explains.

The first is at the Evros river, separating Greece and Turkey. This is the only alternative to anyone who wants to avoid the risk of crossing by boat to the Greek islands, where recent [reports of pushbacks by the Greek police back to Turkey](#) are rife.

“The second border is the one between Bosnia and Croatia,” he pauses. “The road between these two borders and all the way to Italy or Austria is what [we call ‘the Game’](#).” “It is by doing the Game that I got these” he says pointing to his scars.

Doing the Game is one of the only alternatives to reach Europe without having to cross the Mediterranean Sea. But crossing the Balkans is a similarly dangerous journey, like a ‘game’, played against the police forces of the countries on the route, so as to not get caught and arrested.

With the outbreak of the pandemic, the Game has become more difficult and dangerous. Many have reported cases of [sexual and violent abuse](#) from the police. In Croatia police officers forced people to lie on top of one another [naked](#) whilst being beaten and getting crosses [spray-painted](#) on their heads, being stolen of all their possessions, with their phones getting smashed or simply thrown in water.



Major migration routes to Europe. Source: [BVMN Special Report on Covid-19](#).



A site of pushbacks on the Croatian-Bosnian border close to Katinovac. Phones can be seen at the bottom of the river bed. This is a practice often used by Border police to remove the chance for people on the move to find their way across the border or record pushbacks.

The last of thirteen siblings, Saeed wants to reach a cousin in Marseille; an opportunity to escape unemployment in Pakistan and send money back home to his family and kids in Karachi. Despite his desired destination being in France, Saeed was forced to apply for asylum in Italy to buy some time and avoid being arrested and taken back to Bosnia.



It is unclear if border policies implemented since the start of the pandemic are preventing or fomenting more human trafficking.

Under current regulations governing refugee law, Saeed's asylum application in Italy is unlikely to be accepted. Poverty and a dream for a better future are not recognized as valid reasons to be granted refugee status in Europe.

79.5 million
forcibly displaced
people (1 in 100) VS
272
million
international migrants
(1 in 30) worldwide
(UNHCR, 2019)

Despite being a skilled electrician looking to work, Saeed's asylum application makes it impossible for him to legally work in Italy. To survive, he started working as a guide for other migrants, a low-level smuggler making the most of what he learned during the Game.

He pulls a second phone out of his pocket and takes a call. "There are 70 men crossing the mountains from Slovenia who will be here by 4 am tomorrow" he says. The large group will be split into smaller groups once arrived at the Italian border, Saeed explains, so as to not be too noticeable. The mountain paths around Trieste are full of signs of passage, sleeping bags, shoes and clothes scattered around the place where groups decide to stop and camp the night before doing the final stretch to Trieste's train station.

Sources: [IOM 2020](#) and [UNHCR 2019](#).



A mountain path in the forest between Italy and Slovenia. Clothes and other items are often left by people on the move during the journey.

"When they arrive, I'll be their point of contact. I'll show them where to access aid, how to get an Italian sim card and give them money that their families have sent to me via Western Union." He pauses, "I know some of them because we were in the same camps in Bosnia. I try to help them as I know what it is like, and in return they pay me a small fee."

All along the route there are those like Saeed, who manage to make a small living from the irregular migration route. However, it isn't easy to recognize a smuggler's good intentions, and not every smuggler is like Saeed. "There are also smugglers who make a big business by stealing money or taking advantage of less experienced people," he says.

Pointing to two young Afghani boys Saeed shrugs: "They asked me where they could go to prostitute themselves to pay for the next part of the journey. There are many people ready to make money out of our misery."

Border violence and the fear of contagion

Since the start of pandemic, doing the game has become even worse. For migrants and asylum seekers on the Balkan route, it has meant adding the risk of infection to the one of arrest.

"If the police are looking for you, it's hard to worry about getting sick with the virus. The most important thing is not to get arrested and sent back", said Saeed.



Saeed was pushed back to Bosnia five times before managing to reach Trieste and applying for asylum in Italy. As an asylum seeker however, he cannot work and as such, he's decided to work as a low-level smuggler, helping others to reach Trieste for a small fee.

Covid rules on migration have had the effect of pushing migrants and asylum seekers further to the sidelines, excluding them from free testing facilities, their right to healthcare being largely suspended and ignored by national Covid prevention measures.

This is confirmed by Lorenzo Tamaro, representative of Trieste's Autonomous Police Syndicate (SAP). Standing under one of Trieste's sweeping arches he begins. The pandemic has made it more dangerous for them [migrants and asylum seekers], as it is for us [the police]".

For the whole of 2020, Italian police have had to deal with the difficult task of stopping irregular entries whilst also performing extraordinary duties during two months of [strictly enforced lockdown](#).



"The pandemic has revealed a systemic crisis in policing immigration in Europe, one we have been denouncing for years", Tamaro says. He refers to how Italian police are both under-staffed and under-resourced when facing irregular migration, more so during the lockdown imposed due to Covid-19.

Broad shouldered, his voice carries with it the confidence of someone used to being interviewed. "Foreigners entering our territory with no authorization are in breach of the law, even more so under national lockdown. It's not us [the police] who make the law, but it is our job to make sure it is respected".

Born in Trieste himself, Tamaro and his colleagues have been dealing with immigration from the Balkans for years. The emergency brought by increased arrivals during Italy's tight lockdown period pushed the Ministry of Interior to request the deployment of a [100-strong Italian army](#)

[contingent](#) to the border with Slovenia, to assist in the [detection and arrest](#) of people on the move and their transferal to quarantine camps on the outskirts of the city.



One of the Covid-screening sites for migrants and asylum seekers in Italy is in Ferneti, right on the border with Slovenia. The site is made by tents from the Italian army and is located right in front of a hosting center for asylum seekers called 'Casa Malala'.

"We have been left to deal with both an immigration and public health emergency without any real support." Tamaro says. "The army is of help in stopping irregular migrants, but it's then us [the police] who have to carry out medical screenings without proper protective equipment. This is something the Ministry should have specialized doctors and medics do, not the police".

To deal with the increase in arrivals from the Balkan route, Italy revived a [1996 bilateral agreement](#) with Slovenia, which dictates that any undocumented person found 10 km of the Slovenian border within the first 24 hours of arrival, can be informally readmitted to Slovenia.

"In my opinion readmissions work," Tamaro says. "Smugglers have started taking migrants to Udine and Gorizia, which are outside of the 10 km zone of informal readmissions, because they know that if stopped in Trieste, they risk being taken back to Slovenia."



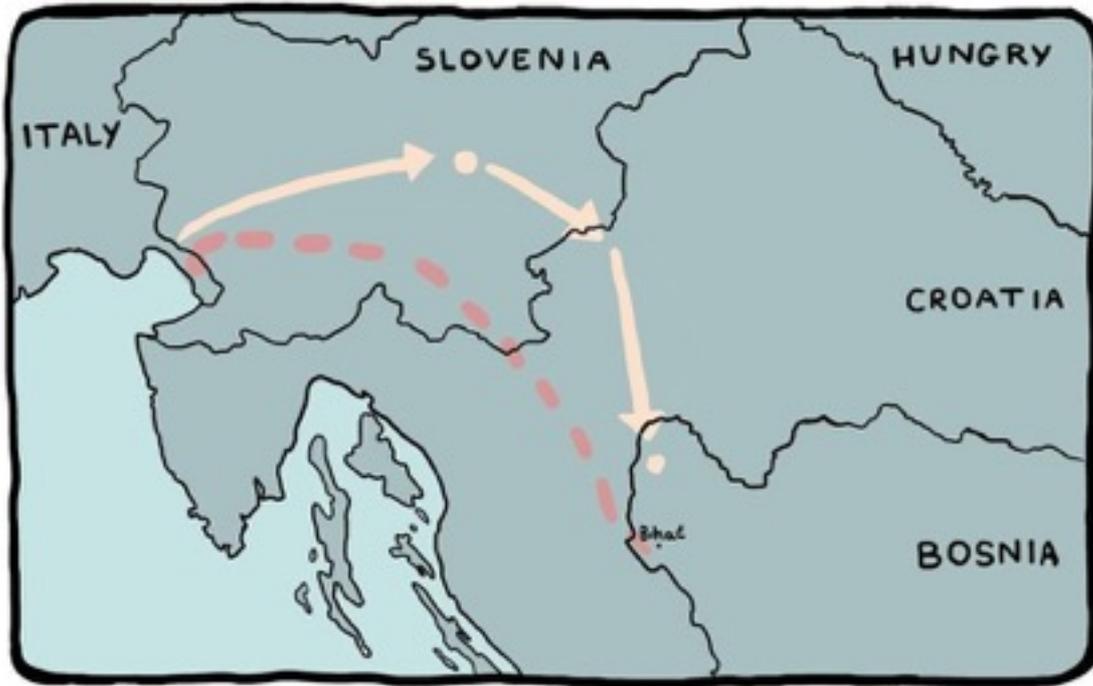
On September 6th, the Italian Interior Minister herself acknowledged [3,059 people have been returned](#) to Slovenia from Trieste in 2020 alone, a 1000 more than the same period in 2019.

38% rate
of **positive** outcomes
on **first-instance** asylum
decisions in Europe in 2019
(EUROSTAT)

[Human rights observers](#) have criticized this agreement for actively denying people on the move to request asylum and thus going against European law. "We know Italy is sending people back to Slovenia saying they can apply for asylum there. But the pushback does not end there", says Miha, a member of the Slovenian solidarity initiative *Info Kolpa*.

From his airy apartment overlooking Ljubljana, Miha explains how Slovenia [resurfaced a readmission agreement](#) with Croatia in June 2018 which has allowed an increase in pushbacks from Slovenia to Croatia.

"Italy sends people to Slovenia and Slovenia to Croatia" Miha says. "And from Croatia, they get pushed back further to Bosnia" he pauses. "What Europe is ignoring is that this is a system of coordinated chain-pushbacks, designed to send people back from Europe to Bosnia, a non-EU country. And adding to the breach of human rights, no one is worrying about the high risk of contagion."



A map representing the migration route from Bosnia to Italy (in red) and the chain-pushback operation (in pink) from Italy back to Bosnia.

Torture at Europe's doorstep

As pushbacks become more normalized, so has the violence used to implement them. Because the Croatian-Bosnian border is an external EU-border, Croatia and Bosnia do not have readmission agreements similar to those with Italy and Slovenia.

As such, pushbacks cannot simply happen through police cooperation. They happen informally. And it is here that the greatest violence takes place.

Despite the Bosnian-Croatian border runs for more than 900 km most of the border crossing happens in a specific location, in the Una Sana canton, the top eastern tip of Bosnia.

The border here is far from tall fences with barbed wire one might expect. The scenery cuts across a beautiful landscape of forestry and mountain streams, with winding countryside roads gently curving around family-run farms and small towns.

"I've seen it all" Stepjan says, looking out from his small whitewashed home, perched less than 100 meters from the actual Bosnian-Croatian border line. A 45-year old man born and raised in this town, he adds: "People have been using this route for years to try and cross into Europe. Sometimes I give them [people on the move] water or food when they pass."

Many of the locals living on either side of the border speak German. They themselves have been migrants to Germany in the 90s, when this used to be a war zone. Asked about the allegations of physical abuse inflicted upon migrants, Stepjan shrugged, replying "It's not for me to tell the police how to do their job".

"By law, once a person arrives on Croatian territory they have the right to seek asylum," says Nikol, a Croatian activist working with the organization *No Name Kitchen* on this stretch of the border. "But this right is denied by Croatian police who force people to return to Bosnia".

Sitting in a smoky café in Zagreb, she is planning her return to Bihac as soon as Covid regulations will allow her to move. Bihac is the key town of the Una Sana canton, the hotspot where most of the people on the move are waiting to cross into Croatia.

She knows all about the violence perpetrated here against migrants and asylum seekers trying to enter Europe. "The Croatian police hands people over to men in plain uniform and balaclavas, who torture migrants before forcing them to walk back across the border to Bosnia."

Many migrants and asylum seekers that have managed to cross Croatia have reported about men dressed in black uniforms and wearing balaclavas, some sort of special unit with the mandate to beat and torture migrants before sending them back to Bosnia.



Whilst it remains unknown the exact identity of these men in black, Border Violence Monitoring Network's [report](#) shows that such attire is consistent with the Croatian Ministry of Interior's Intervention Police Units.

Nikol has a gallery of pictures depicting the aftermath of the violence. "There is so much [evidence of torture in Croatia](#) that I am surprised there are still journalists looking to verify it" she says as she flicks through pictures of beatings on her phone.

Scrolling through, she brings up picture after picture of open wounds and arms, backs and bodies marked with signs of repeated beatings, burns and cuts.

She goes through a series of pictures of young men with swollen bloody faces, and explains: "These men were made to lie on the ground facing down, and then stamped on their heads to break their noses one after the other".





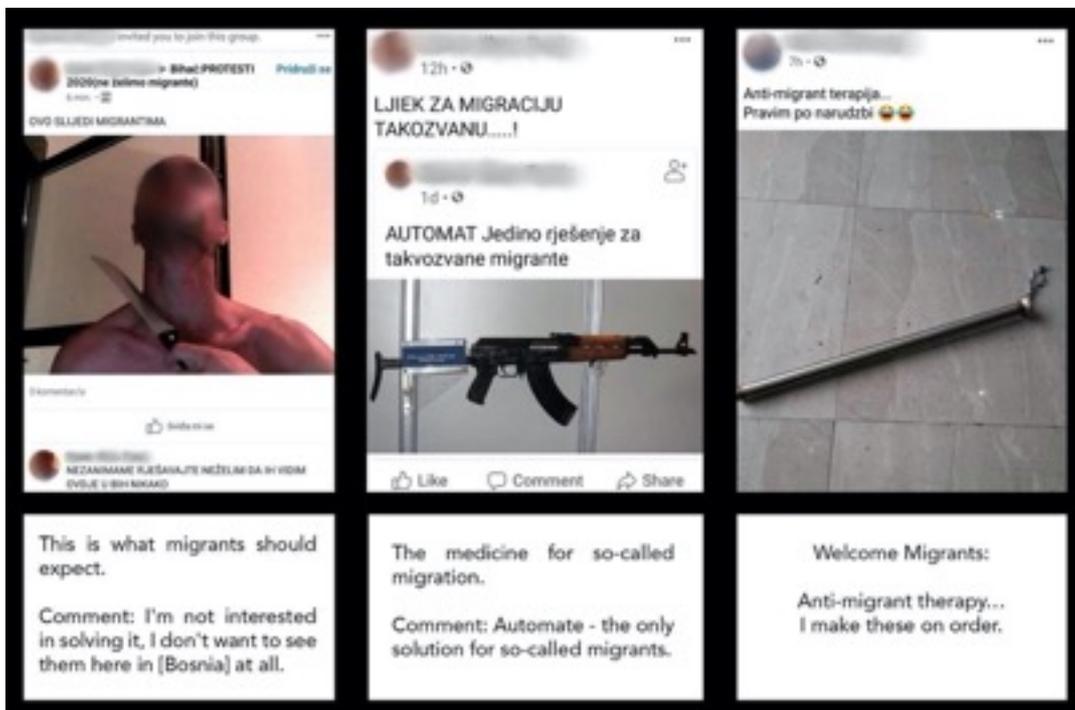
Activists and volunteers receive pictures from people on the move about the beatings and torture received whilst undergoing pushbacks.

"These are the same techniques that the Croatian police used to terrorize the Serbian minorities in Croatia after the war" she adds.

Finding Croats like Nikol willing to help people on the move is not easy. Whilst Stepjan says he is not amongst those who call the police when he sees people attempting to cross, a policeman from the border police station in Čabar openly disclosed that "it is thanks to the tip offs we get from local citizens that we know how and when to intervene and arrest migrants".

As confirmed also by Nikol, the level of public anger and fear against people on the move has grown during the pandemic, fueled by anti-immigrant rhetoric linked with fake and unverified news accusing foreigners of bringing Covid along.

Much of this discourse has been taking place on social media. Far right hate groups have been praising the violence against migrants and asylum seekers through posts like the ones reported below, which despite being signaled for their violent contents, have not yet been removed by Facebook.



Hate speech and violent threats against people on the move and organizations supporting them are posted on Facebook and other social media on a daily basis. Despite being reported, most of them are not taken down.

Nikol's accounts are confirmed by Antonia, a caseworker at the Center for Peace Studies in Zagreb, who is working closely on some legal challenges made against Croatian police.

"We continue to receive testimonies of people being tied to trees, terrorized by the shooting of weapons close to their faces, having stinging liquids rubbed into open wounds, being spray-painted upon, sexually abused and beaten with bats and rubber tubes on the head, arms and legs".

In July this summer, an anonymous complaint by a group of Croatian police officers was made public by the Croatian ombudswoman. In the letter, officers denounced some of their superiors of being violent toward people on the move, suggesting that such violence is systematic. [A translation in English is available HERE.](#)

This was also the opinion of doctors in Trieste, volunteering to treat people's wounds once they arrive in Italy after having crossed Croatia and Slovenia. Their accounts confirm that the violence they often see marked on bodies is not just the consequence of police deterrence, but is rather meant to cause long-term injuries that might make a further journey impossible.



Doctors, activists and volunteers have mobilized along the Balkan route to provide medical, legal and information support to people attempting the Game. Many of these are just informal initiatives, born out of the lack of any other provision by the State.

Neither the Croatian nor the Slovenian national police have responded to these allegations through their press offices. The EU Home Affairs spokesperson office instead did reply, reporting that "Croatian authorities have committed to investigate reports of mistreatment at their external borders, monitor this situation closely and keep the Commission informed on progress made".

And whilst the EU has sent a monitoring team to meet the Croatian Interior Minister, it nevertheless continues to add to [Croatia's internal security fund](#), sending over 100 million Euro since 2015 to manage migration through Visa systems, policing and border security.

€131.2 million overall EU funding to Croatia for border management in 2014-20 (EU COMMISSION)

Back to square one.



Pushbacks from Italy, Slovenia and Croatia all the way back to Bosnia end with people on the move returning to overcrowded reception facilities, unsanitary camps, squats or tents, in inhumane conditions, often without running water or electricity.

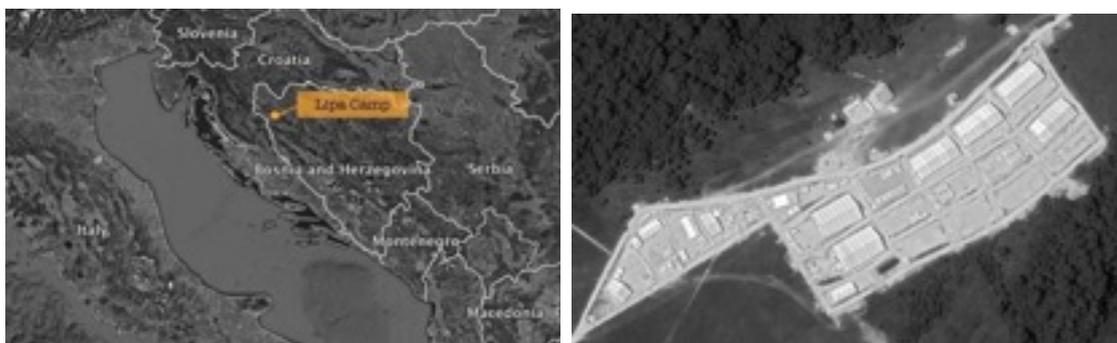
“These people have traveled thousands of kilometers, for months, and are now at the door of the European Union. They don't want to return home,” Slobodan Ujic, Director of Bosnia's Service for Foreigners' Affairs, admitted in [an interview to Balkan Insight](#) earlier this year.

“We are not inhumane, but we now have 30,000, 40,000 or 50,000 unemployed, while keeping 10,000 illegal migrants in full force.... we have become a parking lot for migrants for Europe” Ujic added.

Today thousands of people in Bosnia are currently facing a snowy winter with no suitable facilities for refuge. Since the start of January the bad weather has increased rains and snowfalls, making living on tents and abandoned buildings with no heating a new cause of humanitarian concern.

In Bosnia around 7,500 people on the move are registered in eight camps run by the UNHCR and International Organization for Migration (IOM). The estimated number of migrants and asylum seekers in the country however, tops 30.000. 3.5 million have recently been sent from the EU to manage the humanitarian crisis, adding to the over [40 million Euro donated](#) to Bosnia since 2015 to build and manage temporary camps.

With the start of the pandemic, these reception centers became more like outdoor detention centers as Bosnian authorities [forcefully transferred](#) and confined people on the move to these facilities despite the overcrowding and inhumane conditions.



A satellite image of the IOM camp of Lipa, 30 km south of Bihac.

"I was taken from the squat I was in by Bosnian police and confined in a camp of Lipa, a few kilometers south of Bihac, for over a month" Saeed says. "We had one toilet between 10 of us, no electricity and only one meal a day".

On the 23rd December 2020, Lipa camp, home to 1,300 people, was shut down as NGOs refused to run the camp due to the inhumane conditions and lack of running water and electricity. This came at a time where the closure of the camp had also been advocated by Bosnian local authorities of the Una Sana canton, pressured in local elections to close the facility. As people evacuated however, four residents, allegedly frustrated with the fact that they were being evicted with nowhere to go, set the camp on fire.



The quarantine camp of Lipa that was built in the Una Sana canton at the start of the Covid pandemic, was burned to the ground on December 23rd, allegedly by former residents protesting for the camp's closure.

The trauma of living through forced lockdown in those conditions will have a lasting effect on those who have lived it. "I still have nightmares about that place and the journey" Saeed says, avoiding eye contact.

"Most nights I hear the sound of dogs barking and I remember the running. But in my dreams, I am paralyzed to the ground and I cannot move."

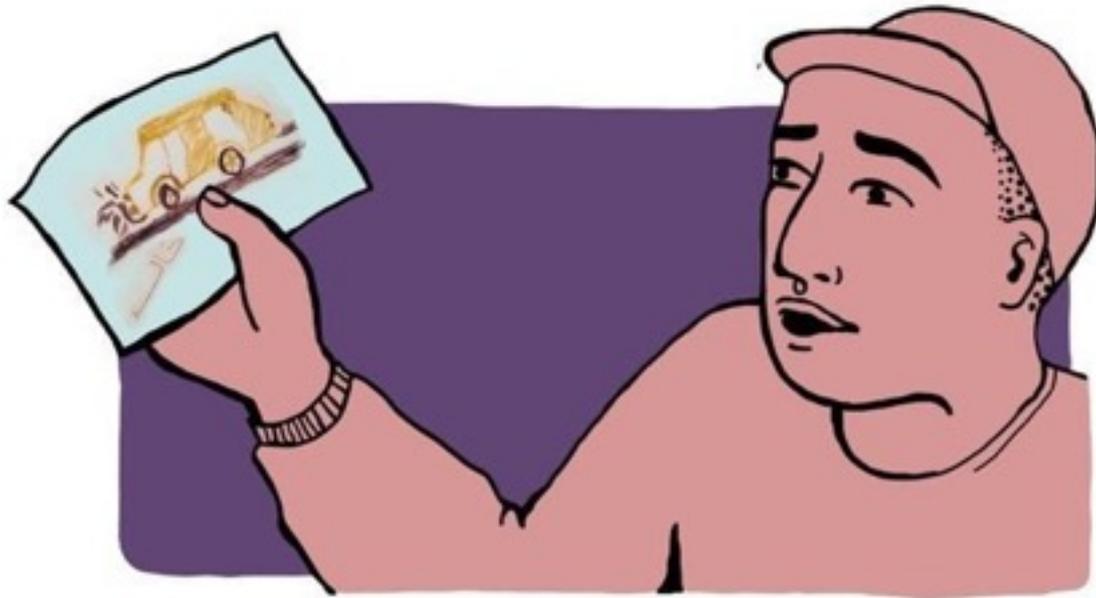
When Saeed managed to escape Lipa camp in June 2020, it took him three weeks to walk back to Trieste. "Now I spend my days here" he gestures across, showing his open palms to Piazza Libertà.

As he speaks, Saeed is joined by two friends. A long scar twists a line of shiny nobbled skin across the scalp of one of them: a baton from a police officer in Croatia. The other has burnt the tip of his own fingers to avoid being fingerprinted and sent back to Greece.



The absurdity of Europe's migration policy is marked on their bodies. The trauma imprinted in their minds.

"I dream of being able to drive a car to France, like any normal person, on a road with only green traffic lights ahead, no barriers to stop me".



The hand-drawn illustration made by Saeed.

This article was a production of the Brush & Bow C.I.C Collective, and was developed with the support of the Journalismfund.eu.

