Balkan Corridor

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The formal establishment of the migration corridor in late summer 2015 came after the climax of a **long summer of migration**, when the countries along the Balkan route officially joined efforts to facilitate the transit of people on the move from Greece to Austria and Germany. This collaboration involved various activities, from simplifying administrative regulations for entry and transit, organizing transportation and waiting areas, to enhancing cooperation among the states along the route. Although the terms “Balkan route” and “Balkan corridor” carry multiple meanings and differ from one another, in public discourse they have been equated to such an extent that the closure of the corridor created the impression that the **Balkan route** itself had also been shut down.

The Balkan corridor developed gradually, as states and their administrations absorbed and intensified practices that had already been autonomously carried out by a wide variety of actors, from Turkey to Central Europe. These practices, not initiated by the states, emerged spontaneously, from below, as local action—through resistance, conflict, and negotiation—participating in the creation of an informal corridor that allowed for faster movement, thus penetrating the repressive border regime. These developments showed that political, social, and economic dynamics at the regional level can have an unexpected impact on the European migration and border regime.

In the spring of 2015, people on the move in Serbia mentioned the existence of organized bus transportation from Thessaloniki and Athens to the border with North Macedonia, where an increasing number of people were crossing the border. Since North Macedonia enforced a strict policy of penalizing drivers who were found to be transporting undocumented people, people on the move opted to travel on foot, following the railway tracks, mostly at night, in order to avoid detection. In late April 2015, 14 people lost their lives when they were struck by a train. In response to this tragedy, a Facebook group titled Help the Refugees in Macedonia was formed, where citizens of North Macedonia, activists from Greece, Serbia, and other countries, along with people on the move themselves, began exchanging information and coordinating support—ranging from food and shelter to medical assistance. Civil society organizations successfully pressured Macedonian authorities to legalize motorized transit for this group: in June 2015, a 72-hour stay permit was granted after the group expressed their intention to seek asylum (Beznec et al. 2016).

In Serbia, in May 2015, youth from Preševo, gathered in the informal network *Youth for Refugees*, began regularly assisting people arriving from the Tabanovce area. To prevent **taxi drivers** transporting people on the move from Miratovac to Preševo (and beyond) from charging unrealistic and significantly inflated prices, volunteers initiated talks with international organizations such as UNHCR and Doctors Without Borders to find a way to organize free transport. UNHCR initially managed to arrange transportation by off-road vehicles from the border for people with limited mobility, children, pregnant women, the elderly, and the sick. Later, when North Macedonia amended its law that allowed transit and organized railway transport from Gevgelija to Tabanovce, it also secured bus transportation for all (Stojić Mitrović 2021). In the spring of 2015, Hungary decided to start building a border **fence** to block entry and transit through its territory, while in the south, North Macedonia was announcing the legalization of transit to facilitate it. In response, Serbia, through a government decision, formed a working group to address the issue of mixed migration flows. The regulation of movement was accelerated by new capacities, temporary registration centers at the entry points to Macedonia (Preševo, June-July 2015) and Bulgaria (Dimitrovgrad, November 2015), enabling fast and unhindered transportation by buses and taxis to the north (carried out, unlike other countries in the corridor, by private carriers).

The announcement of the completion of Hungary’s border fence led to a marked acceleration of movement in August and September 2015. The completion of the fence and the closure of the border on September 16 were followed by protests. Serbian state officials, together with people on the move, stood in front of the gates, seeking shelter from tear gas and water cannons and assisting the injured. On the same day, transportation was organized from the Hungarian border and the south toward Croatia. In the period that followed, Serbia established transit-reception centers at the so-called exit points along the Croatian border (Šid Station, Principovac, and Adaševci) to provide short-term reception, where people on the move waited to continue their journeys. This redirection of the main route from Hungary toward Croatia, along with organized transport through Croatia and Slovenia to Austria, marked the beginning of formal international coordination of the Balkan migration corridor. This was also a period of intensified police cooperation, primarily through the exchange of information, expertise, and field coordination (joint patrols from different countries, controls, harmonization of administrative forms, etc.), and of closer alignment between Western Balkan states and the EU, which provided political and financial incentives to control migration (Stojić Mitrović 2021).

Croatia had a different experience with the formalization of the corridor (e.g., Župarić-Iljić and Valenta 2019; Bužinkić and Hameršak 2018). After Hungary began gradually closing its border with Serbia on 15 September 2015, the route shifted toward Croatia. The following day, media already reported that several thousand people had entered through the "green border," moving from the direction of Šid toward Tovarnik. Unlike Serbia, the Croatian state took on a dominant role in regulating movement from the very beginning. The state's temporary, ad hoc solutions were oriented toward establishing an operational and logistical system that aimed to maintain full control over the entry, transit, and exit of people on the move across Croatian territory toward the next transfer and transit point within the corridor, toward Slovenia and onward to Western European countries. By mid-September 2015, following the first mass arrivals of people on the move in Croatia, buses were organized in Tovarnik to transport people to designated locations, where Croatian police directed them onto trains with scheduled travel routes toward Hungarian and Slovenian authorities, who would then take over.

In parallel with this form of strictly controlled transit, transportation was also organized to registration centers in Ježevo, Zagreb, Čepin, Beli Manastir, and elsewhere (Hameršak and Pleše 2018). Shortly after the first large-scale entries, on 20 September 2015, the Opatovac reception center, i.e. Camp Opatovac, was opened with a capacity of up to 5000 people. The plan was to bring individuals entering Croatia at Tovarnik, Bapska, and other unmarked crossings along the eastern border to Opatovac, where they would be registered, accommodated for no more than 48 hours, and then transported by train further toward Hungary, and partially toward Slovenia. At the same time, numerous smaller groups of self-organized citizens began supporting people on the move at the Zagreb railway station, near the green border crossing at Bapska, and on the bridge at Ključ Brdovečki. During this period, the first larger volunteer and activist associations were also formed, including the Welcome Initiative and Are You Syrious?. However, after Hungary closed its border with Croatia in mid-October 2015, preparations started for adapting and opening a new camp. On 3 November 2015, the **Winter Reception and Transit Center** near Slavonski Brod was opened, and the Opatovac Center ceased operations. The new camp was completely fenced-off, with no possibility of free movement, and divided into multiple sectors, with a total capacity of 5000 people (Župarić-Iljić and Valenta 2019). With the opening of the Slavonski Brod camp, the systematic practice of a securitized, controlled, and humanitarianized corridor for the rapid transit of people on the move continued, stretching from Idomeni in northern Greece to Šentilj in northern Slovenia. At one point, an agreement was even reached among the chiefs of police from countries along the Balkan route to use a unified certificate, issued in Gevgelija, which would be valid from the North Macedonian-Greek border all the way to Austria.

Slovenia's inclusion in the corridor followed a somewhat different dynamic. As in Croatia, movement was strictly controlled, and this segment of the route also functioned as a form of mobile detention for people on the move. On 18 September 2015, a large group of people on the move were stranded between Croatia and Slovenia, at the Rigonce–Harmica and Obrežje–Bregana border crossings. Every few hours, new groups of around a thousand people arrived. The police held people at the border, even at night, for several days. At first, no formal organization was present, and there was no organized distribution of food or clothing; self-organized activists could access the stranded people only occasionally (Lunaček Brumen and Meh 2016: 29). What unfolded, both in real time and through media coverage, was a "spectacle at the border" (De Genova 2002), a carefully staged enactment of exclusion. It was a spectacle of selection of people, a display of police power, the withholding of information, and imprisonment in the open. At the same time, borders became visible as spaces of negotiation, resistance, and solidarity.

Over time, the provision of aid became institutionalized: large heated tents were set up in Dobova and Šentilj, with regular food distribution and access to medical care (Lunaček Brumen and Meh 2016: 29). Humanitarian assistance was fully taken over by aid organizations under the coordination of Civil Protection, which had received an official mandate from the state. Volunteers were granted access only through humanitarian organizations and under their terms. It is important to note that even before the formal establishment of the corridor, in August 2015, the Antiracist Front Without Borders (Protirasistična fronta brez meja) emerged in Ljubljana, an informal network of collectives that initially organized several "Refugees Welcome" demonstrations. Soon after, they began traveling to the borders to meet newly arriving people and distribute humanitarian aid, eventually opening their spaces and collectives to refugees. In the former squat of the Autonomous Factory Rog (Avtonomna tovarna Rog), they organized welcome evenings with refugees and offered space for self-organization (Pistotnik et al. 2016: 105–6). Migrant collectives such as Embassy Rog and Second Home, as well as the knitting group No Border Craft, were formed during this period, all operating out of the former Autonomous Factory Rog.

With the implementation of refugee **profiling** along the Balkan corridor in November 2015, the corridor remained open only to so-called **SIA** nationals: those from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Over time, access to the corridor was restricted further: first excluding Afghans, and later other groups as well, including Syrians from the Damascus region, or those whose documents issued in Greece listed January 1 as their birth date (Beznec et al. 2016; Stojić Mitrović 2021).

Just as the corridor did not emerge overnight, it did not end abruptly either. The entry into force of the EU–Turkey agreement, adopted on 18 March 2016, is commonly regarded as its formal conclusion. However, state-organized transit had already been suspended several days earlier. In contrast to its formation, which was driven from

below, the dismantling of the corridor was imposed from above. Accordingly, while the corridor had developed from the south toward the north and west, its closure unfolded in the opposite direction: from Austria, through Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia, down to North Macedonia. The full closure of the camp in Slavonski Brod took place in mid-April 2016, which marked the official end of the Balkan corridor. Even after the corridor was dismantled, people on the move continued to arrive in Zagreb and Ljubljana, albeit through much more expensive, slower, and significantly more dangerous routes. The consequences of the corridor continued to be felt for months, and even years, after its closure. Western European states deported hundreds of people, who had reached these countries via the corridor, back to Croatia under the **Dublin Regulation**. This mass movement in reverse soon became known as the reverse Balkan route, or the **counter-corridor**.

During its formation and duration, the corridor formally brought together countries that were otherwise bound by complex and often strained relationships: former Yugoslav republics, EU Member States, candidate countries, Schengen states, and aspirants to Schengen accession. These differences ceased to function as stumbling blocks in pursuit of a shared goal and interest: to ensure the fastest and smoothest possible transit, with minimal delays. Although the term humanitarian corridor was frequently invoked in media discourse, the corridor involved the suppression of freedom of movement, the forced routing of people along predetermined paths and means of transport, and the exclusion of certain individuals often based on racial profiling disguised as linguistic testing. Through techniques and technologies of **humanitarian exception**, the corridor gradually evolved into an increasingly effective security apparatus for managing and repressing unwanted mobility. As Zoppi and Puleri (2021) emphasize, the order of things on the Balkan route underwent a profound and irreversible transformation following the corridor's closure. It did not return to its earlier form: a relatively spontaneous, overland, and significantly less dangerous smuggling passage to the EU (particularly when compared to sea routes). Instead, it crystallized into the kind of space it remains today—surveilled and securitized, marked by border control, militarization, and human suffering.

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