Restaurant of Hospitality in Bihać

Meta Poklukar

For several years now, **Bihać** has been relegated to a backdrop on the **Balkan migrant route**. People on the way who are illegalized face many obstacles in exercising rights within the countries in which they currently reside. One of the consequences of illegalization is also the reduced right of access to spaces that are open to citizens. For people on the move, the premises are divided into those they are allowed to enter and those they are not. During the short student fieldwork in Bihać undertaken by students of ethnology and cultural anthropology in March 2022, I noticed various places, mostly parks and abandoned buildings, where we can meet people on the move, but when we enter the city center and look around, we will very rarely, if ever, see people on the move sitting in a crowd of people, drinking coffee or eating lunch. The reason for this is not only their poor financial situation, but exclusion from society as well.

On our first day in Bihać, during fieldwork, we heard different stories from the local population about how solidarity is criminalized and that officially they are not allowed to help migrants by giving them clothes, food, or any other form of help, because the police would issue them a fine. As noted by Uršula Lipovec Čebron, Tina Ivnik and Eva Fekonja (2019), even in **Velika Kladuša**, which is located in the same canton in western Bosnia, hospitality was followed by closing access to migrants. Their analysis showed that this was strongly influenced by the **criminalization of solidarity**. The signs “Foreigners without documents are forbidden to enter” began to appear in cafes and restaurants, some institutions installed bars on their windows, and the doors of some shops remain locked until the employees are sure of who is standing in front of them (Lipovec Čebron et al. 2019: 150).

I did not notice the mentioned kinds of practices in Bihać, but I heard about a restaurant in Bihać where migrants are welcome, so I went there to check whether this were true. I noticed a separate area in the restaurant with a few chairs and tables. I did not see anyone sitting there. I asked the waiter did they really welcome migrants and what was the reaction for other residents. He answered:

> Yes, it's true, why not, since we're all human, he also allows me to come to the restaurant and order. We are not interested in what others think, when large numbers of migrants started arriving, the owner of the restaurant decided that as long as no one makes trouble and they keep their quarrels outside, there is no problem.

From further conversation with the waiter, it was clear that they don’t have problems with the locals who come to the restaurant because of welcoming migrants in the restaurant. On the contrary, some have become friends with them and occasionally chat, drink and eat with them. While sitting in the restaurant, I noticed two younger migrants sitting at a table with two locals. They greeted each other with a hug, smiled, and made many other gestures while sitting together. Other people in the restaurant did not turn around nor reacted in any other way to what was happening, which means that the gathering is not unusual. The space is filled with positive and friendly energy. The waiter came up to me and said: “You see, they are also sitting with the locals, we are all people here and all friends, if that bothers anyone, we don't need such people here.” He showed me the room behind the archway and explained that migrants could stay there without ordering anything, as the room was made especially for them. “Sometimes they order something, and sometimes we also bring them some soup on the house.”

The restaurant. Bihać, 26 March 2022. Photo: Meta Poklukar

The area separated by the arch is large and it contains a few tables and chairs. One wall is completely covered by a window facing the street. I also noticed a Pakistani flag in the corner and the waiter later pointed it out. “We want them to feel at home and accepted,” he told me.

Later, the waiter explained how people on the move had became his friends and that he also had many contacts from those who managed to reach their destination, they called him and asked how was he doing. He told me an anecdote about how someone couldn't pay, but he told him that it was fine, that he would cover it from his salary. He was going to the **game** the next day and promised to pay him back when he reached his destination. When he succeeded, he transferred the amount owed to him through an online bank. The waiter said that he himself had been a migrant as a child because of the war, and that this was perhaps the reason he had more understanding for their situation. It is evident that the practice of **solidarity** forged friendships. “I have kept in touch with some of them, we talk to each other every now and then, they also check how I and my family are doing.”

I asked the waiter how did the police act because of the possible criminalization of solidarity, given their openness to welcoming migrants into the restaurant.

> In principle, we don't have any major problems with the police, unless there are riots between them. When they see the police outside, we warn the migrants to go through the back exit and avoid them. Sometimes we give them a few marks so that they don't give us a fine, but in principle we don't have problems often. Other restaurants also don't call the police or give us trouble, why would they, everyone can make their own decisions. Sometimes we hear some comments on the street, but we ignore it.

The waiter’s discomfort when talking about how the police handle these cases was noticable, although he did mention that bribes were often given to the police. The other two waiters didn't even want to discuss it, they just said that they didn't have any problems. Due to our time in Bihaćbeing short, it is difficult to precisely ascertain the relations and agreements between the police and the restaurant, as the locals and volunteers clearly expressed that the criminalization of hospitality and tighter control of local authorities is taking place in Bihać. For Jelka Zorn (2021: 174), solidarity means building a community based on the values of anti-racism and in an autonomous way (without the state, market relations and large humanitarian organizations).

The next day, when I returned to the restaurant, I saw three young men sitting in the area reserved for migrants. I decided to join them. I greeted them and when I asked if I could join them, they offered me a chair without hesitation. I asked them if they would like something to drink, and they smiled and answered me by asking if I would like something to drink, that they were the ones ordering here. After talking for a while about where they were from, where they were staying, how long they had been on the road, I asked them if this was really the only restaurant they could visit. Most of them answered that it was, the youngest told me that, because he was here as

a minor, he had friends here and had no problems with where he could go, but the others were not welcome anywhere.

> We hang out here a lot, especially in winter when it's cold outside. We used to have another space, the kitchen, where volunteers also came, but recently it was closed by the police, so we can no longer cook there. Once we prepared more than fifty chapatis for the other migrants and volunteers. Really. (he showed me a video of a room with a large stove, a counter and shaped dough)

During our conversation, more than ten people were present in the space, and none of them gave me the feeling that I didn't belong there. Everyone greeted me with a smile and a handshake and talked to me. After a while, the waiter brought Coca-Cola for everyone at the table. When I told the waiter that I would pay, he laughed and told me no, that he ordered it and that he would pay. That's when I realized that it's better to let them pay for my drink since I'm a guest and it would be rude of me to refuse. I also got the impression that this was their space and therefore a matter of dignity to have me as their guest. I felt a little uneasy because I believed I'm better off financially and should be the one paying, but I started to understand. I started to understand the journey a little bit, the relationships they develop while going through it, and how they were deprived of many opportunities to express themselves and their hospitality. Then I gladly accepted the role of guest. I think a lot about this space as the only one they currently have on this journey while living in Bihać. With all the dehumanization that they experience at the hands of the police, this is a space that allows them to feel normal and human. Socializing in a room with a fellow human being, ordering a drink and paying for it, a normal everyday occurrence. Something that, at least for a moment, allows a person to relax and not think about what they are forced to face in the future.

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Literature

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Notes

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