

Slavonski Brod Camp

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After the camp in Opatovac, which operated from September to November 2015, the Winter Reception and Transit Centre of the Republic of Croatia was opened in early November of the same year in a settlement near Slavonski Brod, the industrial zone Bjeliš, the camp was colloquially known as the Slavonski Brod camp. The minister of Interior of the Republic of Croatia, Ranko Ostojić, announced the camp as a temporary refuge for refugees in transit from Serbia through Croatia, on the section of the **Balkan route** established by the agreement between the interior ministers of Croatia and Serbia. The agreement stipulated that refugees from Šid in Serbia would enter Croatia by train, briefly stop at the camp in Slavonski Brod, and then continue by train to Dobova in Slovenia. According to official statements, the camp was intended to ensure better organization of transit and automated registration of migrants and refugees.

According to descriptions accompanying photographs taken during the first fifteen or so days of the camp's operation, which were published by the Croatian government on its official website, the camp was divided into six sectors. These sectors housed tents for triage and medical assistance, as well as the Red Cross tent that provided a service for finding missing family members and psychosocial support. The camp also contained military tents, although they were out of sight of volunteers and staff, a tent mess hall for volunteers and employees, and an NGO warehouse managed by the German humanitarian organization Intereuropean Human Aid Association (IHA). There were also tents designated for waiting for family members who had been separated during their journey, as well as tents with about twenty beds, and tents with a capacity of a thousand beds. Offices for non-governmental, intergovernmental, and other organizations operating in the camp were located in containers, and heated cabins were provided for families with children. Containers also included bathrooms, and mobile toilets were placed at several points. At the official entrance to the camp, used by everyone except refugees, there was a main brick building where the police were stationed, while other solid structures housed the infirmary under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Health and the Red Cross warehouse.

The camp was situated on a 40,000 square meter area within the business premises of INA, a Croatian oil company. The advantages of the location, as stated by the mentioned minister, included existing solid structures and a railway track within the complex where the camp was being established. He explained that this spatial organization would facilitate the transportation of refugees and ensure that the local community would not be adversely affected by their presence: "So, from the border directly to the camp, registration, accommodation, assistance with everything needed, possible medical aid, and then transit towards Schengen." Official statements and political declarations, even before the camp was established, justified this transit logic with the intention that Croatia would not become a so-called hotspot, or a place where refugees would stay for an extended period. Indeed, the layout of tents and containers in the camp suggested quick, almost circular movement of people: the arrival of the train at the platform, directing people to the registration tents where the police conducted checks, entered their data into the information system, and issued certain documents, then passing through the **distribution tent** where humanitarian supplies were provided and food and water were distributed at its exit, and finally back to the platform where people were boarded onto the train for Slovenia.



Aerial view of the camp, Winter Reception and Transit Center in Slavonski Brod, 13 November 2015. Photo source: [Vlada HR](#)

However, the **corridor** established in the described manner was “completely isolated from the surrounding territory it passed through and largely separated from its legal system, population, etc.” and was recognized as “a state-organized mass transfer of people from one border to the other” (Hameršak and Pleše 2018a: 20) and an internationally agreed plan to control and slow down the route. Additionally, the layout and content of the camp changed over time, and reports from certain NGOs as well as research insights indicated that during the five months of the camp’s operation, people were **profiled** and unlawfully incarcerated and **detained**. One such detention in the corresponding sector of the Slavonski Brod camp was documented by researchers:

police directed some of them to the sector on the opposite side of the camp [from the registration tent and the path towards the distribution tent and the train], to the deserted route where they were watched only by a UNHCR representative. According available information, 21 110 persons, mostly men from countries such as Lebanon, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Morocco, Somalia and Ivory Coast, were separated and directed to this sector, which they left the same day (Hameršak and Pleše 2018a: 26).

Later, some of the isolated and detained individuals were kept for several days in a special part of the camp, which, depending on the period of its operation, was sometimes closed and sometimes open to volunteers. Such actions were systematically hidden, kept quiet, and concealed, with no mention of them in the official statements from the Ministry of Interior, nor in media, volunteer, and other reports from and about the camp. Instead, the information came from activist-collected testimonies of “people who had been returned to Serbia after segregation and confinement in Slavonski Brod” (Hameršak and Pleše 2018a: 27). Profiling conducted by the Croatian police sometimes began as early as Šid, on the territory of another country, when certain people were removed from the train based on the police’s assessment of their non-affiliation, for example, to the **SIA** group. Besides arriving by train, people were also brought to the camp by vans and other means. Some were boarded on trains to Slovenia, while others were sent back to Serbia, sometimes even on foot in the middle of winter.

Thus, in addition to its humanitarian function of aid distribution, the camp also served a securitarian function, with the control mechanisms implemented by the Ministry of the Interior aligning with the internationally agreed management of the Balkan corridor as a “mobile form of contemporary humanitarian-securitarian migration management regime, based on territorial and administrative externalization and internalization of border controls, and declaratively depoliticized policies of humanitarian protection” (Hameršak and Pleše 2018b: 110). These security mechanisms encompassed not only people in transit but also volunteers and humanitarian workers. This often caused tensions among the organizations operating in the camp, which had different understandings of the principles of humanitarian work. Some perceived it as an apolitical activity of providing aid, while others insisted on the political or activist component of their work, which included advocacy for migrants’ rights and freedoms (cf. **humanitarian industry**). In addition to the mentioned organizations like the Red Cross and IHA, the camp also hosted intergovernmental organizations and UN agencies (IOM, UNICEF, UNHCR), as well as international and local NGOs such as Caritas, Samaritan’s Purse, Save the Children, CARE, Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), Medical Humanitarian Organization Magna, Volunteer Center Slavonski Brod, Croatian Professional Association of Court Interpreters, Roda Association, Center for Peace Studies, and others. The distribution tent, as the central meeting point for NGO volunteers with Red Cross and UNHCR workers and volunteers, was often the site of “negotiations and consultations as to which clothing items were lacking, who was

allowed to visit whose part of the tent and give out whose donation, as to the (lack of) compliance with the rules agreed upon in the morning briefings between the coordinators and leaders of NGOs and the CRS [Croatian Red Cross], as to how amicable and helpful one should be towards the refugees" (Škokić and Jambrešić Kirin 2018: 94).

In the camp, about a hundred workers, mostly from Slavonski Brod, were employed through public works programs at minimum wage. As noted by Romana Pozniak, due to the presence of a large number of volunteers and humanitarian workers in Slavonski Brod, the camp should also be analyzed from an economic and financial perspective.

The total number of humanitarian workers from November of 2015 to March of 2016 (when the Balkan corridor was closed) ranged from 200 to 300 daily. [...] These people rented hotel rooms, apartments and houses in the city and, logically, used local services and visited local establishments. During that brief time, the refugee camp, although characterised by highly precarious employment, offered financial gain and a "livelier" social life (Pozniak 2019: 77-78).

However, as local workers employed through public works programs complained to us, they were not entitled to receive clothing and footwear, not even work attire, which refugees received, despite some coming to work dressed inappropriately for winter conditions. This is an example of the absurdity of humanitarianism (Škokić and Jambrešić Kirin 2018: 98). On the other hand, the financial benefits to the city somewhat countered the arguments of protesters who, prior to the opening of the camp, opposed its existence with the claim that "our" homeless and poor should be cared for first and that migrants were being fed while people in Slavonia were starving. The livelier social life, apart from increased spending in cafes and restaurants, also meant events such as the implementation of the Interkultura program: a place for encounters of culture, dialogue, and solidarity, which was carried out by the Center for Peace Studies and the Welcome Initiative in cooperation with the Taste of Home (Okus doma) cooperative and the City Library, or with the Volunteer Center Slavonski Brod and the Ivana Brlić Mažuranić kindergarten.

Despite the fact that the camp was visible and significant to the local population during its short duration, its placement on the outskirts of the city, away from the "urban view" of the residents of Slavonski Brod, and its spatial isolation by fences and the river as a natural barrier, characterize it as a space of exception for those disrupting the national order of things (Turner 2015: 139). At the Slavonski Brod camp, as the only stopping point in the corridor, the arrival of 374,148 people was officially recorded. The last train arrived at the camp on 5 March 2016, with about 250 people, and the camp was officially closed on April 15, a few days after the last refugees who had been detained there were relocated.

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