

Switch It up a Little, My Friend

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In September 2015, during the mass movement of refugees who tried to enter Croatia from Serbia and move on to other western countries of the European Union, Croatia briefly closed the Bajakovo border crossing for transport vehicles, which led to a large congestion in the border area between Croatia and Serbia.

The Croatian government considered the temporary closure of the border crossing a warning to Serbia due to, they believed, Serbia directing refugees to pass exclusively through Croatia. The Minister of the Interior of the Republic of Croatia and the head of the Unit for the Coordination of Activities Related to the Arrival of Migrants in the Republic of Croatia, Ranko Ostojić, explained that not a single migrant was crossing the Serbian-Hungarian border and that this was a case of an “organized operation of transporting refugees directly to Croatia”. Reacting to these events, Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić immediately announced an extraordinary session of the Serbian government and imposed a deadline for Croatia to open the border, otherwise Serbia would introduce countermeasures “that will affect Croatia more than us”. Zoran Milanović, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Croatia at the time, reacted to Vučić’s statement, claiming that the temporary closure of the Bajakovo border crossing for transport vehicles is a clear message to Serbia that it must send refugees to other countries as well.

I am not calling out Serbia, but I will tell them to tone it down a bit and to – as that joke goes – switch it up a little, my friend! So, send some of it up to Hungary and to Romania, send it to Croatia. We’ll send it in all directions, and then go to Brussels – where Vučić and his crew won’t be present – to talk about handling this thing at the source, which is Turkey and Greece, which is important. I hold conversations, in a normal and constructive, civilized tone, with the ones in the most difficult position, which are Austria and Germany, and Slovenia, who is in a slightly better position. But who is making the most noise? The ones that are nothing more than a corridor. (...) We’re not idiots here, we can see what they’re trying to do. We can see what they’re trying to do and what kind of deal they have with Budapest. Come on lads, loosen up a bit, we’ll sort everything out. Croatia can take on thousands of people, and will do so in the role of a corridor. We’re organized, to the horror of our political opponents who hate the fact that everything has not fallen apart. But, they have to send this in other directions. Because we cannot and will not accept 20,000 people in two days ([Al Jazeera Balkans 2015](#)).

During the few days that the border crossing was closed, the verbal conflict between the Prime Ministers of both countries continued, with some ministers also getting involved, and the argument was followed by most of the media. Although many commented on Milanović’s “switch it up a little, my friend”, only a few [Croatian](#) and [Serbian](#) news sites, which themselves tend to engage in such discourse, recognized the racist joke behind the phrase because he called the refugees “it” and because, in their view, he was referring to a joke disparaging black people. In addition, [parodies](#) with the phrase “switch it up a little, my friend” appeared, but they emphasized the pointless nature of the debate and made fun of the characters of both prime ministers.

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