

Vučjak

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Also known as the “wild camp”, “nightmare camp” and “jungle camp”, Vučjak was one of those areas that causes a number of controversies in public, media and political discourse. When a former landfill in the vicinity of Bihać, next to the village of Vučjak, was “repurposed” to serve as a refugee camp, it was clear to any person with any knowledge of recent migration events on the European periphery that the multi-layered internal and external political controversies explicitly related to migration policies, and implicitly to the political reality of post-Dayton-Agreement Bosnia and Herzegovina, had reached its peak, while “humanitarian-security management” (Hameršak and Pleše 2018: 110) reached its lowest point.

The violence on the Croatian borders and the increasing prevalence of pushbacks since 2017 had contributed to a significant increase in the number of people on the move in the Una-Sana Canton, especially in the areas of Bihać and Velika Kladuša. In 2019, the police of Bosnia and Herzegovina started to introduce stricter measures for people on the move and to criminalize migration from the Global South, evident from the fact that a curfew was imposed for migrants only, from ten in the evening to six in the morning, which the local government in Bihać interpreted as a measure to prevent crime that allegedly increased with the arrival and presence of migrants (Mlinarević and Ahmetašević 2022: 27). Along with the declared increase in the crime rate, images of overcrowded camps and their alarming hygienic conditions, the life of many people on the move in post-industrial ruins – pushed into homelessness by the impermeability and cruelty of the European border regime – and the lack of political coordination at the governmental level in Bosnia and Herzegovina were used as arguments by the city of Bihać and the Una-Sana Canton (USC) to forbid movement to people on the move, to “remove” them from the public space of the city of Bihać and to transport them or organize a march to Vučjak.

The conditions in the camp itself, the competition between cantonal and state authorities, the reaction of international organizations and the European Union, and sensationalist media reporting allow us to identify Vučjak as a heterotopia (Foucault 1986, cf. also Agier 2019), a spatial and temporal vacuum intended for “human waste” (Bauman 2004) – the unwanted bodies of the Global South – which, despite multiple and sometimes incompatible policies of the European border regime, reflects the common viewpoint of most European institutions of power: that migrants are not welcome here. Michel Foucault defines heterotopias as a kind of “counter-sites” which simultaneously represent, juxtapose, and distort the meanings of all other places in society and culture (1986: 24). The landfill in the vicinity of Bihać, miles away from urban infrastructure and surrounded by minefields, is both a parallel world for unwanted migrants and a reflection of the contemporary socio-political reality, one that, despite the raft of legal instruments in the field of refugeehood and human rights protection, enables and allows the creation of such places – landfills of human waste – located close to European centers or their margins, but remote enough so as not to disturb the daily life of their inhabitants.

While Croatia accused Bosnia and Herzegovina and the authorities of the Una-Sana Canton that they deliberately opened the camp just a few kilometers from its borders, thus encouraging people on the move to “illegally” cross into the Republic of Croatia, international humanitarian organizations strongly condemned the living conditions in Vučjak and refused to participate in the humanitarian organization of the camp, while the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, appeared in the media several times, calling for the immediate closure of Vučjak, stressing that “the area of the camp is unacceptable for the life of migrants” and that, if it were not closed, the people in it would “start dying”. In addition to being placed on a former landfill, Vučjak had no drinking water supply, electricity, heating or sanitary containers, and the migrants lived, as described by one of the Red Cross volunteers, in “mouldy, leaking, overcrowded” tents. Two or four policemen were usually stationed at the entrance to the camp, food was distributed twice a day, and the situation in the camp is best illustrated by the fact that local doctors refused to work there, stating they cannot be responsible for other people’s lives in such conditions (Mlinarević and Ahmetašević 2022: 27). According to local media, around six hundred, and according to other sources, around seven hundred people were placed in about fifty tents on Vučjak.

The specificities of Vučjak, which, in addition to the mentioned characteristics, make it a heterotopic place, include the fact that it was neither a refugee camp like those managed by international humanitarian organizations in the Global South, nor a reception center like the Reception Center for Asylum Seekers in Zagreb, nor was it a self-organized squat, like those found in border, mountain, rural and urban areas on migrant routes (cf. Agier 2019). In contrast, it was a camp opened at the initiative of the local government with the Red Cross as the only permanently present humanitarian organization that coordinated the erection of tents and the distribution of food with minimal financial support, as the camp manager repeatedly emphasized to me and my colleagues during a

field visit to Vučjak in the summer of 2019. Arising at the “intersection of near and far violences,” as described by Azra Hromadžić, and the “historically rooted sense of disappointment [of the citizens of Bihać] in the Bosnian government and the world/Europe ‘that keeps on looking’” (2020: 179), Vučjak was only one of the many “official” jungle camps or wild camps – improvised, tent settlements – formed by local authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina (other such camps include the former Trnovi near Velika Kladuša and the still active Lipa, also in the vicinity of Bihać).

The scenes from Vučjak are difficult to describe. Blankets and pillows jutted out from under the white tents (donations from the Turkish Red Crescent) erected on the muddy, recently cleared landfill, and along with the shoes and summer flip-flops neatly arranged in front of the tent entrances and the occasional group of people making bread on open fires, they illustrated the efforts of the residents to humanize that space, if that was even possible. When I asked one of the volunteers why she was walking around the camp with a loud speaker playing heavy metal, she said that she was trying to raise people’s morale and mood, but in all probability she was only adding to the bizarreness of the place. A participant in my doctoral research (Pozniak 2022), who visited Vučjak as a humanitarian worker for some time, commented on the Red Cross’s responsibility for the conditions in that camp:

Actually, they kind of follow that story from their mandate, that they have to represent, which is simply to help anyone in need. That camp would have happened with or without the Red Cross. Maybe it would be called by another name and located somewhere else. These were all political games regarding the opening of that camp, just as they are now, regarding the closing and opening of camps. They wanted to move migrants away the city center. The state organized it without any knowledge of anything, without any thought and, well, it is what it is.

As a controversial place, Vučjak, with its appearance, position and conditions, contributed to the accumulation of negative meanings about refugee movements and to creating an image of migrants as a threat, which is confirmed by media headlines such as “Migrants in Camp Vučjak Attack Police: They Laid under a Truck and Wanted To Come to Croatia” or “Camp Vučjak To Be Demolished and Set on Fire: Will Migrants Try To Cross the Croatian Border En Masse Tonight?”. Ultimately, it can be said that the camp served its purpose in a political sense, since the fear and outrage experienced and demonstrated by the majority of its visitors, volunteers, media and representatives of European institutions certainly influenced or, at least, accelerated the decision to transfer the migrants from Vučjak to Blažuj, a camp in the vicinity of Sarajevo erected in former barracks, which, in combination with containers and tents, could accommodate 2400 single men (Mlinarević and Ahmetašević 2022: 28). In mid-December 2019, after six months of operation, Vučjak was closed, and most of the migrants were transferred to the Blažuj and Ušivak camps, which partially, perhaps only ostensibly and temporarily, achieved the intent of Bihać to decentralize the responsibility for migration and the accommodation of people on the move in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

As a symbol of violence and the policy of expulsion, the fragmented responsibility of local, cantonal and state authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina combined with the responsibility of the European Union and the ambivalent international humanitarian regime – which condemned the conditions in Vučjak, while almost simultaneously managed camps in Velika Kladuša and Bihać whose conditions were also criticized – Vučjak remains one of the most explicit examples of how political disputes create, reproduce and instrumentalize refugeehood and irregular movements. Its heterotopic nature did not consist only of the materialization of the space for “human waste”, but also in the saturation of local, national and global power politics beyond the humanitarian-security alliance which is characteristic in **migration regimes**.

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