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Migration

The long year of migration and the Balkan corridor

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The past year of migration through the Balkans was both a driving force and result of a number of fractures, all of which cannot be covered in a single article. But to understand the political importance of the recent migration movements along the so-called Balkan route, as well as the lessons they hold for today's migration activists, we must at least explore the core developments that have taken place over the past year. I will do so with reference to the political project Moving Europe, and this article is partly a product of collective discussions within this project.

[Moving Europe](#) was started by [bordermonitoring.eu](#) , [w2eu](#) (Welcome to Europe) and [FFM](#) (Forschungsgesellschaft Flucht und Migration) in collaboration with the NGO [Medico International](#) . It is embedded in a network that has existed for several years and that supports people travelling towards Europe, both by monitoring the external EU borders and by collecting and re-distributing information to people on the move.

Before we begin we must first understand the distinction between two terms that are often confused. The 'Balkan route' is a migration path that has existed for years and is still in use. The 'Balkan corridor', by contrast, refers to a quasi-legal pathway through Europe that, according to the Schengen and Dublin agreements, should not exist. It appeared in the autumn of 2015 as a 'humanitarian' and safer, but still ambivalent safe passage for a few months, which completely closed on 8 March 2016.

History of the Balkan corridor

The migration movement itself, which had been happening in increasing numbers since last spring but which became unstoppable by summer, forced open the corridor in early fall 2015. It is one of the greatest achievements of migration's struggle against Fortress Europe. The opening had several contributory factors, starting with more people coming out of Syria due to the continuation of the war and the growing harshness of conditions in neighbouring countries. In addition to this, the change of government in Greece decreased controls on the Mediterranean Sea. But most important for maintaining the momentum of the corridor was the power, strength and unstoppable determination of those willing to travel on.

People were no longer travelling clandestinely, but became highly visible. As a result, lots of supporters began travelling down the Balkan corridor to support the people on the move, mainly jumping in where the states and big NGOs failed to quickly provide 'humanitarian aid'. States, however, quickly moved to re-assert control by establishing state-run camps and transportation. This narrowed and militarised the route, and access to it became harder as state policies sought once again to make the people using it invisible.

Starting in November 2015, states started to segregate between 'real' refugees – Syrian, Iraqis and Afghanis – and the rest, who were no longer allowed to travel on the corridor; a 'divide-and-rule' strategy. This was used to legitimate the building of fences and the further militarisation of the corridor. The segregation process was done on a very questionable basis through translators and racial profiling. Then, in February 2016, people from Afghanistan were also denied access and absurd rules were made, like declaring Damascus and other cities – including ones under ISIS rule – 'safe' territory or 'non-war zones'. Eventually, the corridor was closed completely by the end of February.

The ambivalence of the corridor lies in the fact that while migration movements successfully created a safe and quick flight route for thousands – a great achievement – as that route became institutionalised it became increasingly state

and police controlled. This led to people being treated like goods, with strong controls over who can come and who cannot.

Before the corridor closure

Until the corridor closure our central activities were to gain and distribute information, monitor mainly police violence, and provide legal aid. Being in regular contact with local activists along the route, we could also be part of a strengthened network that now provides independent information through the various online platforms mentioned above.

However, we could always more or less assure people that in a few days, they would be in Germany. In hindsight, this seems like a ‘golden age’ but at the time it was not as straightforward as it may now seem.

In November 2015, when the corridor became restricted only to people from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, there were then two sets of information to be prepared: for those allowed on the corridor and for those not allowed. Those not allowed to travel on the corridor were rendered invisible so it was sometimes difficult to access them. This was a difficulty we encountered, as by placing too much focus on the three ‘acceptable’ nationalities – even if we did so for purely practical reasons – we somehow became complicit in this segregation.

Despite all our hesitations and discussions, giving verified information was in line with our political goals. It meant that people were more in control of their decisions, more empowered if they knew what was coming ahead. Often we would spend time speaking with them about things such as fingerprinting and asylum processes in different countries.

After the corridor closure

It was a big shock for all of those who had arrived in Greece with the expectation that they would be able to travel onwards easily. The realisation that this situation was a totally new scenario took a while to sink in, and even long-term activists were overwhelmed by the situation. Now there were thousands of people stuck, with little money and little idea of how to go on. Also – although we were very weary of the ‘vulnerability discourse’ – it was very clear that many of those stuck were older generations and women and children, often with husbands already in Germany.

Just after the closure there was much confusion about what was going to happen with Idomeni, formally a transit point and now a protest camp. When we first set up information points there people were starving for information. Information and news was – until today – the last thing that was provided from officials of any kind.

Our role was difficult to negotiate. We became the bearers of bad news. When people asked us if we thought the border would re-open, we had to be honest but also were worried about creating a lot of expectations. We already had some info sheets on the relocation programme and quickly made one on family reunification under Dublin III. But distributing them in such an unclear environment was more than challenging, especially with the knowledge that the relocation programme was an empty promise.

Support structures

The countries along the Balkan route have longstanding support and solidarity structures for local networks: from purely humanitarian approaches to those expressing an explicit political framing of solidarity. Often they are not very strong and don’t have a lot of resources, as these countries were and remain emigration countries as well. The

supporters that arrived last summer from central Europe depend to a large extent on this local knowledge.

Our information gathering would not have been possible without the network of local activists that have been monitoring and following the migration movements through their countries for years. What we distributed to people was information such as: where do I find support, what are my rights, what is the behaviour of police and authorities, etc. We were travelling along the route in a bus, stopping at different spots and collecting information about the constantly changing situation along the route, including information regarding planned political collective actions.

It's also important to point out that the ambivalence within activist and volunteer structures is a constant matter of debate. On the one hand supporters from abroad perceive Balkan countries as blind spots, continuing a neo-colonial discourse. Often accompanied with a lack of awareness of the history and political context of the so-called Balkans, this goes hand in hand with discourses about the 'wild Balkans' and a central European outlook on local cultures and institutions. On the other hand, material differences and hierarchies are obvious: who has got the resources and privileges to support the Balkan route for a sustained period of time?

Change of discourse

After the march of more than 2,000 refugees on 14 March, there was no more agency ascribed to refugees and a constant accusation that protests were initiated by western activists started up. Many activists were targeted for their political expression. Also within solidarity networks this was seen as suspicious. Consequently only 'purely humanitarian' work was valued and remained unharassed in mainstream political discourse, media and within supporter networks. State practices such as illegal pushbacks got less attention in media discourses and activist circles as well.

Ever since the closure, the situation of the people on the move has become increasingly precarious and people are placed in extremely vulnerable positions. They are made to wait in miserable conditions and in complete uncertainty about what will happen to them. The asylum system in Greece is completely dysfunctional, and so is the relocation programme. Many people have family in Germany or other countries, and according to Dublin III they should be transferred to those states once they have filed their asylum claims. However, it is impossible at the moment to claim asylum in Greece. One theoretically must fix an appointment with the Asylum Service via Skype, but they are only open one to two hours a week and nobody ever gets through.

Outlook

The Balkan route is not closed completely. People who have some money are left to travel on with smugglers. Those without money try to walk across Macedonia, then reach Serbia and from there go through Hungary and Austria to Germany. Up to 300 people reach Belgrade daily. Nobody wants to stay in Greece and people are determined to travel on.

In short, while the corridor is closed the route is not. People are still on the move. The EU-Turkey deal has decreased the powerful movement through the Aegean. It remains to be seen if the summer will bring a new moment of collective and massive arrivals by boat, and if the route will change towards the more dangerous route via the central Mediterranean.

Regardless of what this year has in store, the collective memory of last summer lingers in many ways. We witnessed what can happen when state control and EU border politics meet migrant mobility strategies and self-organisation. It gave rise to something new. The migration movements not only challenged borders and border regimes, but core narratives of the EU as well. They also challenged the answers given by EU and its nation states to the current

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financial crisis, to austerity politics, to questions of housing, labour, citizenship and education – just to name a few. In other words, the migration movements reminded societies all over Europe of those core social and political narratives and also of the lack of alternatives given by EU and its nation states.

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