

2021

I WALK THE LINE

**Solidarity strongholds
along the Balkan route**

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Since the beginning of the year, at the gates of the European Union, on what has come to be known as the "Balkan route," thousands of people in transit, migrants, and asylum seekers have been stranded in inhuman and life-threatening conditions.

Sadly, this situation is not new along the borders of the European Union where, at least since 2015, barriers and walls are in the process of building, people are being pushed back, and camps are being set up, in unashamed and hostile violation of human rights, international law and the constitutional rights of many member states. It is necessary to recall all the subjects and actors involved to respect, among others, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, the Geneva Convention, and the Italian Constitution.

A large number of people from Austria and Germany - partly due to the strong presence of the Bosnian diaspora - and from Italy and other European countries have started acting in support of the work of the Red Cross and other local associations and volunteers in an attempt to alleviate this umpteenth humanitarian disaster along the "Balkan route."

Among these Ipsia (Acli), Caritas, No Name Kitchen, Sos Balkan route, Pomozi.ba, Emmaus, ComPas Sarajevo 071, and other Italian and international volunteers and activists are particularly active. Through their engagement, a chain of solidarity has been set off across Italy's different regions, involving citizens, associations, parishes, political parties circles, trade unions, and others, collecting money, clothes, and other essential items. There are several areas in Bosnia and Herzegovina where the situation is critical, not only in the Una-Sana Canton but also in Tuzla, Mostar, and Sarajevo itself well as in Serbia, Montenegro, and other Balkan countries.

Anolf and the Iscos network (who has been working on international cooperation projects in Bosnia Herzegovina for years) have also raised how to contribute concretely. Through awareness-raising, solidarity, and political actions, Anolf and Iscos are managing to provide aid in loco and back up removing the causes of this severe violation of human rights, together with CISL and the European Trade Union Confederation Ces Etuc.

During these weeks, we had the opportunity to meet and discuss with local activists and operators along the Balkan route, European Parliament members, trade unionists, institutional representatives, journalists, and researchers to better understand the situation and propose actions and interventions. Therefore, we are very much aware of the urgency of mobilizing every possible resource to lobby socially and politically the Italian Government, the Commission, and the EU Council to stop the violence, deprivation, and violation of fundamental human rights.



In particular, we consider it crucial to give centrality to the European Parliament as a place where migration policies are decided and designed. We believe that the package of migration policies currently under discussion should be radically changed and that these policies should be discussed and planned in compliance with the most basic international human rights standard that constitutes the foundation of the European Union's history and *raison d'être*.

Whatever way they are conceived, migration policies cannot include practices and measures in open and explicit violation of international law, human rights, and individual member states' constitutional rights. However, this has systematically occurred for at least five years now and is continuously happening today with cases of "informal readmission," pushback, denial of assistance, violence, and torture.

Many of these practices are now frequently adopted by European law enforcement agencies and interior ministries, in blatant disregard of the law and violation of the EU's External Borders Code, the Dublin III Regulation, and other laws concerning asylum. The role and action of Frontex, which cannot carry out pushback actions, must be profoundly reconsidered.

Similarly, all measures that criminalize the "people on the move" for their very condition of having embarked on a migration path, which in itself constitutes a form of "crime," must be removed as soon as possible. People cannot be blamed simply for trying to escape from situations of war, poverty, torture, social and political violence. Instead of opening up channels and spaces for protection, they are persecuted and deprived of their natural right to hope for a life worth living. All too often, repressive policies and persecution of people on the move favor, rather than curb, the actions of traffickers; as a consequence, violence, deprivation, torture, and blackmail expand.

It is also urgent to stop actions aimed at criminalizing volunteers and civil society organizations engaged in solidarity actions for the "people on the move," migrants and international protection seekers. The acts of intimidation, repression, and criminalization carried out, even recently in our country, against activists and volunteers who provide essential help, relief, and solidarity to people afflicted by violence and draughts at the limits of humanity are unacceptable.

This situation fuels and justifies, to some extent, the diffusion of hate speech and the culture of hate, discrimination, and violence perpetrated by ordinary citizens against people on the move and volunteers. Female volunteers especially are often threatened, mocked, humiliated, and harassed by their fellow citizens. It is, therefore, necessary to put an end to the physical and psychological violence that people on the move suffer daily at several levels.



We oppose and reject any European or national intervention that envisages the setting up and structuring “temporary” reception camps along the Community’s borders and within its Member States (e.g., Greece). As witnessed by the living conditions, including of women and children, in camps managed by the IOM such as Blažuj (Sarajevo) or Sedra (Cazin), centers do nothing but replicate and accentuate mechanisms of exclusion, discrimination, and social segregation for individuals, families, and minors whose only guilt is having embarked on a migration path.

We, therefore, consider it urgent:

- to start procedures for the evacuation of all persons blocked, voluntarily or involuntarily, in formal and informal camps, jungles, and squats, including by the opening of humanitarian corridors and forms of international protection;
- to promote any initiative of European and national support to encourage the development of ordinary and widespread forms of reception throughout the area, which is not based on the logic of camps, and with special attention for most vulnerable situations;
- that the Italian institutions (local levels included) and the European institutions do everything in their power to ensure that: the authorities of the countries involved do not harass or intimidate NGOs and international organizations of volunteers; the provisions governing these organizations working in assistance of “people on the move” and migrants, do not hamper their activities;
- to establish as soon as possible independent monitoring systems and procedures to verify impartially what is happening inside the camps, in the border territories, and the border control procedures themselves;
- that the Italian Government clarifies immediately what is happening on its Eastern borders; that it strictly monitors and possible censures the procedures of readmission of migrants between Italy, Slovenia, and Croatia, any violence committed during these procedures, and the pushbacks from these countries to Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina; that it effectively protects the right of access to the asylum procedure by EU law and the 1951 Geneva Convention;



- that the European Commission clarifies and informs the European Parliament about the pushbacks involving one or more of its Member States;
- to create a sustainable asylum system, based on shared responsibility and with the rights and solidarity placed at the center, as also provided for in Article 80 of the Treaty on the EU's Functioning. This shall include an appropriate reform of the Dublin Regulation, overcoming the responsibility of the country of the first entry of evaluation of the application, and providing for a compulsory distribution of asylum seekers among all the European countries based on fair parameters that take into account also the links of the applicants with their country of origin;
- that foreign citizens be guaranteed access to information and the possibility to apply for international protection at the border, also by making use of the work of qualified organizations and associations;
- to invite all local institutions, regions, trade unions, and political parties to adopt resolutions, motions, and agendas, intended to ask the Italian Government for answers on what is happening along the Balkan route. In this way, a real action designed to reshape the migration policies from the grassroots level shall take place democratically, that shall finally lead to actual recognition of people's rights and the termination of the physical and psychological violence against those who are currently trapped at our "borders."

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photos Iscos Emilia Romagna