

# The Security-scape and the (In)Visibility of Refugees: Managing Refugee Flow through Croatia

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## SUMMARY

The article analyses certain aspects of the exceptional migration process unfolding in Europe from the middle of September to the beginning of November, 2015. It focuses on analysis of managing that migration in Croatia through the presentation of the functioning of the reception (and transit) centre at Opatovac. A qualitative ethnographic and anthropological research approach has been applied. The ethnographic perspective offers a complex view of responses to the events, pointing out the paradoxes in refugee reception and transit migration management in Croatia. It is established that there are constant contradictions contained in the nexus of security and humanitarian demands in the migration process management, these largely coming to the fore because of a lack of international co-operation and a firm stance and common policy on the part of the EU. In that way, the EU has contributed to the deepening of the humanitarian migration crisis, but also demonstrated its deep value crisis.

KEY WORDS: refugees, migrants, security, humaneness, Croatia, EU

## INTRODUCTION

Forced out by the civil wars throughout the Middle East, hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants were fleeing their homes and heading toward Western Europe during 2015. On their route, they had to cross Turkey and the Aegean Sea to reach the Greek islands, a first entry point into the European Union. The route continued by ferry to mainland Greece, and then through Macedonia (to a lesser extent Bulgaria) and Serbia. Until the late summer of 2015 it went through Hungary. Confronted with more than 350,000 migrants who moved through its territory in the summer of 2015 on their way to Austria, Hungary erected a wire fence and eventually sealed off its border, first with Serbia (mid-September) and then with Croatia (mid-

October). Since mid-September, Croatia has become the main corridor for the passage towards Hungary and Slovenia and to final destinations in Austria and Germany. Between mid-September and the end of November, some 460,000 migrants were transported through Croatia towards Hungary and Slovenia. At times, more than 10,000 persons crossed the Croatian border with Serbia and were transported to the West on a daily basis. That unprecedented level of arrivals was a consequence of the *de facto* suspension of the Dublin Regulation<sup>1</sup> and the German Prime Minister announcing that Germany would receive the Syrians. This decision was explained in terms of (controversial) labour demand of German industry.<sup>2</sup> It is no doubt that moral and humane considerations also played a role, because it followed humanitarian disasters such as the discovery of a truck with 71 suffocated migrants in Austria in late August. Good summer and autumn weather was certainly also contributing to the continuous migration flow from war-torn areas in the Middle East.

The exodus toward EU and, in particular, toward Germany, occurred against a backdrop of the confident statement by the German Prime Minister on August 30, 2015 that Germany would manage the reception of refugees and overcome whatever came in its way while doing so.<sup>3</sup> However, the Prime Minister's confidence has been challenged many times over the months that followed, mainly because most EU states have shown no solidarity in sharing the growing number of migrants and establishing a joint action plan to deal with the unprecedented number of arrivals. Months of mutual accusations made by the states included in the transit and reception of refugees followed, with dissonant voices preventing an agreement on a common European policy and sharing of refugees.

<sup>1</sup> EU asylum legislation requires migrants to apply for asylum in the first EU country in which they arrive. Greece has been exempt from this regulation since 2011 due to its dysfunctional asylum system; hence Hungary became the first entry point to the EU on this route. Hungary tried to apply the legislation, but gave up under the pressure of the numbers (Kallias, Monterescu and Rajaram, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> See articles published on this topic, among other: <http://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/deutschland/bundesbankpraesident-deutschland-braucht-zuwanderer/12326282.html>; <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/beruf-chance/arbeitswelt/neue-prognose-deutschland-braucht-mehr-arbeitskraefte-13603140.html>; <http://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/migration/kurz-dossiers/57450/braucht-deutschland-zuwanderung>; <http://www.vorwaerts.de/artikel/deutscher-arbeitsmarkt-braucht-500-000-zuwanderer-pro-jahr> (3 November 2015).

<sup>3</sup> In full: "Wir haben so vieles geschafft, wir schaffen das. Wir schaffen das, und wo uns etwas im Wege steht, muss es überwunden werden" or: "We have managed so much, we will manage it. We will manage it, and if something comes in our way, it must be overcome", <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/angela-merkels-sommerpressekonferenz-13778484.html> (31 August 2015).

Speaking at the *Migration Crisis and the Future of the European Project* forum at the European Parliamentary Office of Information in Zagreb on October 9, 2015 one of the speakers, a European MP, Tonino Picula, said that the impossibility of solving the migration crisis was an indicator of the EU political crisis. The migration crisis, according to Picula, is the trigger to the key questions on the future organisation of the EU and the relations between the Member States, in fact, to the very sense of the EU's existence and profile that it will build in the future.<sup>4</sup> Will the EU continue to build on the community, solidarity and co-operation that gave rise to the European project after World War II? Or will the centrifugal forces of particular national politics increasingly divide the already weak European political arena, on the background of unequal economic and social realities? Due to the absence of a common migration policy and response to the 2015 refugee "crisis",<sup>5</sup> one cannot help feeling that the latter scenario has better prospects of becoming reality.

The article shows that the attempt at control and finding a solution within one nation-state is futile in a situation of lack of solidarity and co-operation between nation-states directly or indirectly implicated in the migration flow. It argues that, despite Germany's driving force and determination to come to grips with the large number of refugees, the opposing national responses to the refugee flow have worsened the humanitarian deficit inherent in all refugee migration and deepened the entire "crisis". This is shown by analysis of migration flow management in Croatia during September and October, 2015. Relying on ethnographic field research and encounters with various actors in the events as the source of interpretation, the article points out complexities in managing this migration in the Croatian and European context.

## A TERMINOLOGICAL NOTE: MIGRANT OR REFUGEE

This contribution does not have the intention of differentiating and theoretically analysing the terms *migrant* and *refugee*. However, due to the differences of opinion on the appropriate term, I shall briefly refer to them. Actors in this mixed migration flow encompass various categories of voluntary and involuntary (forced) migrants. The generic term "migrant" includes

<sup>4</sup> See: <http://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/399838/Izbjeglice-okidac-za-raspravu-o-EU-za-deset-godina.html> (3 November 2015).

<sup>5</sup> The term "crisis" is a euphemism that inadequately describes the scale and dehumanising effects of the current mass immigration into Europe.

every person who moves to another country with the intention of staying there for a certain time.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, in describing the phenomenon I speak of migrants or the migration flow/process. We usually consider economic migrants to be voluntary migrants, while we call involuntary migrants refugees. The departure of refugees is imposed and usually the consequence of external force or violence (cf. Heršak, 1998: 90). The reasons for which they decide to migrate vary, but are usually connected with wartime peril, persecution because of race, religion, nationality or political opinion, membership in a particular social group, the lack of respect for human rights, and the like (cf. the Convention on Refugee Status of 1951<sup>7</sup>). More recently, forced migration is also connected with natural disasters. It is rarely possible to differentiate the motives for migration, so that the border between the two main categories – voluntary and involuntary migrants – is difficult to draw. That has occurred in the case of migration flows in 2015, too, with Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans being joined by Bangladeshis, Pakistanis and Kosovari, among others. However, since most of the persons in this case come from devastated war zones, marked by political and economic instability, I shall call them refugees (cf. the Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies, 2015).

## THE POSSIBILITIES FOR ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE REFUGEE PHENOMENON

I travelled to the area directly exposed to the arrival of refugees in eastern Croatia (the villages of Tovarnik and Opatovac) prompted by human motives and scholarly interest, since the refugee theme is one of the fields of my research, particularly connected with forced migration during and after the disintegration of Yugoslavia (e.g. Čapo Žmegač, 2005, 2007; Čapo, 2014). Apart from that, I wanted to witness at close hand the events that had been deploying before our eyes for months. Their dimensions and intensity over a brief period as well as certain characteristics (the heterogenic origins of the refugees, the diversification of the migration motives, the share of unaccompanied minors etc.) (cf. OECD, 2015) have not been seen in the European space in the last sixty years or so.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The term “migrant” is encumbered with connotations on origin and socio-economic status: e.g. businessmen and employees of trans-national companies coming from the US or Western Europe is never referred to as migrants, but as “expatriates” or “mobile individuals”.

<sup>7</sup> Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, *UNTS*, 189 (2545), 28. 07. 1951.

<sup>8</sup> Comparisons according to criteria of forced migration or mass character could be drawn

Departure to the location of events is a classical method in cultural and social anthropology, a nomadic discipline that bases its insights, analyses and interpretations on direct experience and encounters with the events' participants. In going there I wanted, first of all, to study the reactions of the local population to the refugee situation and establish if they were inclined to perceive the refugees as an economic, social and cultural threat as mentioned in quantitatively (Čačić-Kumpes, Gregurović and Kumpes, 2012; Župarić-Iljić and Gregurović, 2013; see Župarić-Iljić 2013 for a review of those studies), but also qualitatively (ethnographically) based studies (Pozniak and Petrović, 2014). I have dealt with that aspect of the issue in another article (Čapo, 2015).

I believed that personal contact with the refugees themselves and inquiry into their motives, stories and aspirations was not an option at this stage. On the one hand, the question was if one could – and how – “study” the refugees at this moment of their transit through Croatia. On the other, I was not inclined to transform my research into “epistemic violence” towards the refugees (De Genova according to Andersson, 2014: 12), by submitting heterogeneous voices and human destinies to a reducing ethnographic gaze. As was shown during my six-day stay in the field, conversations with the refugees could not, in any case, be conducted. Because of their large number, the short duration of their stay at the Opatovac reception centre, the police control that surrounded them, the impossibility of my moving freely and for any length of time at the reception centre, my encounters with the refugees were brief and informative, journalistic, and not of the ethnographic-research type.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs issued me a permit for entry and brief stays at the reception centre over several days. A direct insight into what was happening in and around the reception centre led me to an analysis of the system of refugee reception in Croatia – its configuration, functioning and the harrowing consequences that it had for the refugees during my stay on the spot, from October 18 to 23, 2015.

The interpretation herein is based on media information, official notifications by the Ministry of Internal Affairs<sup>9</sup> and on what I saw and learnt

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with the migration of the ethnic German population from the eastern parts of Europe towards Germany after World War II, or of migration in the aftermath of decolonisation; for example, the exodus of the French from Algiers in the 1960s, and the like (cf. OECD, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Since September 16, 2015 The Ministry of Internal Affairs has been posting on its official pages notifications on the Reception and Accommodation of Migrants in the Republic of Croatia, in Croatian and English (see: <http://www.mup.hr/219671.aspx>; <http://www.>

through conversations with various actors within and outside the reception centre: members of the local population not directly engaged in refugee reception, the mayors of the Lovas (of which Opatovac is a part) and Tovarnik municipalities, local volunteers and people officially engaged in refugee reception, translators, doctors, bus drivers who transported the refugees, police officers and refugees themselves.

Spending time in the field cannot encompass its entirety and that is why post-modern ethnography is fragmentary (Tyler, 1986). Such is also my attempt to integrate my partial and fragmentary experience of a complex situation into anthropological theories of society, state, space and border. The ambiguity and subjectivity of the researcher (along with the added ambiguity and subjectivity of the reader) are unavoidable; the text will thus probably be interpreted in different ways and misinterpreted, since “the meaning of the text is the sum of its misreadings”, said Stephen Tyler already thirty years ago (1986: 135).

## THE HISTORY OF EVENTS IN CROATIA

From September 15, 2015, after Hungary had completed its installation of a razor-wire fence towards Serbia and made impossible the further passage of refugees from that country towards Austria and Germany, the refugees in Serbia were re-routed towards the Croatian border. In the border municipality of Tovarnik, the police, the State Administration for Protection and Rescue, and the Croatian Red Cross were prepared for reception of refugees in the courtyard of the police station. It was anticipated that up to 500 refugees would arrive per day. However, on the very first day, September 15 and overnight leading to September 17, 5,650 refugees entered Croatia with some 11,000 persons to the end of that second day.<sup>10</sup> A month later, a female inhabitant of Tovarnik described her utter amazement with the huge number of refugees who had arrived in only two days in her small village of some 1,500 people:

*I had never seen such a huge number of people... they were sleeping along the road, in the canals, and there were thousands of them. You can't cross the street towards the railway station, there's no chance of crossing it. Only the Red Cross vehicle could pass through.*

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mup.hr/main.aspx?id=219696 ). On October 21, 2015, it also posted the document “Migration Crisis in Croatia: Overview”, <http://www.mup.hr/219671.aspx> (16 February 2016). The media sources are cited according to the summary of HINA's (Croatian information agency) news items from September 16 to November 3, 2015, prepared with the kind help of Ivo Lučić.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.mup.hr/main.aspx?id=220928> (2 February 2016).

It would seem that the state was not prepared for the number of people who would come. The media reports that were arriving almost hour by hour rectified previous reports and gave various contradictory pieces of information. In expectation of a small number of people, it was planned to register them in the existing centres for asylum-seekers and other places in which such centres could readily be set up due to the existing infrastructure, so the refugees were sent towards them at first (to Zagreb, Sisak, Osijek, and Beli Manastir).<sup>11</sup> However, it soon became clear that the number of refugees exceeded Croatian reception capacities, so that the Minister for Internal Affairs was named on September 17 as the head of the Government's "Headquarters for Coordination of Activities Related to the Arrival of Migrants in the Republic of Croatia" and he announced the possibility of shutting down the border.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, completely contradictory news items alternated: that building of the tent settlement near Vinkovci had been halted,<sup>13</sup> the announcement of building one near Osijek<sup>14</sup> that the Varaždin garrison was being prepared to accommodate refugees<sup>15</sup> and the like.

The newspapers abounded in criticism of the government and the organisation of refugee reception. The assessments by local and county authorities were of "a humanitarian catastrophe", "a siege" and "a chaotic situation", "the non-existence of government planning" and the like.<sup>16</sup> The above-quoted Tovarnik inhabitant described the first days of refugee reception in Tovarnik, in which she herself volunteered, as

*a terrible, indescribable experience, an emergency situation, general chaos, no one had been expecting such an opera (...) not even in their wildest dreams...*

The Prime Minister made a statement in which he said that the refugees would not be stopping in Croatia: "they will pass and transit through Croatia", a land of "small possibilities" but with "a big heart".<sup>17</sup> At the same time he rejected the possibility that Croatia would be forced to give more permanent shelter to refugees. On the third day following the first arrival of the refugees in Croatia, he repeated that Croatia did not want to be a *hot spot* for Europe and that

*we will not prevent those people from entering, but also not from leaving, beca-*

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.mup.hr/main.aspx?id=220928> (16 February 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Source: HINA, Sept. 17, 2015. NEWS-H9176986:1

<sup>13</sup> Source: HINA, Sept. 17, 2015. NEWS-H9176851:1

<sup>14</sup> Source: HINA, Sept. 17, 2015. NEWS-H9176851:1; NEWS-H9176913:1

<sup>15</sup> Source: HINA, Sept. 18, 2015. NEWS-H9187114:1

<sup>16</sup> Source: HINA, Sept. 17, 2015. NEWS-H9176855:1; NEWS-H9176944:1

<sup>17</sup> Source: HINA, Sept. 17, 2015. NEWS-H9176964:1

*use it is otherwise clear that none of them wants to stay in Croatia, but we will not allow them to travel alone along the roads.*<sup>18</sup>

Those statements indicate the strategy selected by the government: permit the entry of refugees, organise their transit towards other European countries and control their movements through Croatia. Its strategy coincided with the demands of the refugees that they be permitted to go to their desired destinations, mostly in Germany. For that purpose, the reception centre was set up in the disused crude oil warehouse in Opatovac in the Lovas municipality, some fifteen kilometres from the unofficial border crossing with Serbia near Bapska. The reception centre with a capacity for around 3,500 persons was opened on September 21, five days after the refugees started to arrive in Croatia. Though officially named “reception centre”, the establishment actually functioned as a transit centre for refugees.

The following procedure was to become stabilised through the next month: entry was largely by way of the illegal crossing near Bapska and to a lesser degree near Tovarnik, the so-called green belt, but not through the official crossing. From the border, refugees were transported to the reception centre in Opatovac where they were registered and given basic humanitarian aid before continuing on their way towards Hungary. At the beginning of November, when this article was completed, the number of refugees who had passed through Croatia since mid-September had reached 300,000.<sup>19</sup>

For a month, right up until October 17, Hungary enabled unhindered entry of refugees from Croatia by train through Botovo (an illegal border crossing) or by bus through Baranjsko Petrovo Selo. Despite constant interstate tension between Croatia and Hungary, transit continued without incident. However, after the completion of the barbed-wire barrier towards Croatia, Hungary blocked further transit, and a new refugee route was established towards Slovenia. The rate of flow was reduced during the first few days from complete closing of entry to Hungary. At the same time, the pressure of refugees on the Croatian-Serbian border increased and excess situations occurred on both sides of the border as well as on the Slovenian-Croatian border.

Because of the increasingly unfavourable weather conditions, the Croatian government decided to build a new reception centre in Slavonski Brod, around one hundred kilometres from the state border with Serbia. After a two-week preparation period, the first trains from Tovarnik and from

<sup>18</sup> Source: HINA, Sept. 18, 2015. NEWS-H9187097:1

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.mup.hr/main.aspx?id=225848> (16 February 2016).

Šid (in Serbia) arrived on November 3, and soon after that the reception centre at Opatovac was closed.

## FACILITATING TRANSIT AND SUSPENSION OF BORDER CONTROLS

Confronted with tenfold higher numbers than those that had been anticipated and for which it had been prepared, the Croatian government decided on a specific form of migration flow management – facilitating transit through Croatia. Managing migration implies control over the entry of people into the country and the application of migration policy.<sup>20</sup> However, under the exceptional circumstances of mass migration flows on a daily basis, migration policy as a whole and in the asylum area was suspended, while management had been reduced to helping people in exodus. In this process, there occurred violations of the border regime and state sovereignty.

The extraordinary collective force resulting from the mass nature and persistence of the refugees along with the collective psychosis of sorts that ruled among them because of the possibility of closing the EU border, the arrival of autumn and unfavourable weather conditions, and the dangers overcome on the previously completed journey, explain why the refugees could not be stopped by police cordons, border lines drawn between neighbouring countries, wire fences, bad weather, or by the lack of co-operation between the neighbouring countries on the transit route. Refugees seek solutions themselves when they believe that an obstacle has arisen in transit, when they crowd around at the border crossing or at the railway station, while the conditions under which they wait to be relocated are inadequate. In fact, refugees cannot bear waiting, and as one interview partner said, “they respect only force”. They demand to be let through and treated with dignity on their journey; they take matters into their own hands and become agents of their own destiny (cf. Liisa Malkki, 1996 according to Kallius, Monterescu and Rajaram, 2016). I witnessed that when I met people who had broken through the police cordon on the border with Serbia on October 19 and then walked fifteen kilometres to the reception centre in Opatovac in cold and rainy weather. That was a vivid example of their resilience, their unstoppable nature and the demand that the border be opened so that they could continue their journey towards their chosen destination. Chanting “open, open” at the state border was also a cry for dignified treat-

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<sup>20</sup> Croatia has migration policy for the 2013 – 2015 periods. Its sections also encompass the area of political asylum.

ment and a sign of their conviction of the justification of their demands. For Croatia, as for other countries on the refugee route, there was no alternative but to enable them unhindered crossing of the state border.

A state border is a key element in national ideology and the narration about identity; it is an instrument of state policy and a symbol of sovereignty (“the sacred border of state territory”) (De Genova, 2013: 1183), the legal, political and military dividing line between state territories (Donnan and Haller, 1999). Therefore, border control is a symbolic demonstration and visual staging of the state and its sovereignty (Donnan and Haller, 1999). However, in the face of the mass arrival of refugees, borders were shown to be “spectacularly inefficient” (cf. Andersson, 2015), while the “illegality” of the refugees was “spectacularly visible” (De Genova, 2013: 1181).

The mass nature of the refugee movement removed the focus from the legal, political and even symbolic aspects of their *de facto* and *de iure* illegal crossing of the Croatian state border. Only in its first daily reports did the Ministry of Internal Affairs mention “illegal border crossing”<sup>21</sup>; subsequently, that qualification disappeared and only “entries” and “departures” were mentioned. It can be assumed that this occurred with an intention to avoid stressing that what was happening was *de facto* illegal crossing of the border.

The border was also crossed illegally when entering the Schengen EU, that is, when crossing into Hungary and Slovenia. Until that time, the porosity of state borders within the EU had functioned only inside the Schengen area. It was the suspension of internal border control that reinforced the outer Schengen borders (since they defended the European zone of security and freedom of movement). That conferred upon the EU the infamous title of “the European fortress” and led to the progressive “securitisation of migration”, i.e. strengthening of the security discourses and the technologies of supervision over refugees and asylum-seekers and/or migrants in general (Guild and Bigo, 2003; Bigo, 1998; Goldstein, 2010; Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies, 2015). Several member states – Spain, England, Bulgaria, and Hungary – also put up fences (partly or completely) in an attempt to halt the entry of immigrants. Analysing the African-Spanish border, Ruben Andersson claimed that, by reinforcing European borders, politicians were creating “a spectacular policy of fear” (Andersson, 2015), which was forcing migrants into the grey zone of smugglers and bandits on the one hand and, on the other, enabling entrepreneurs to develop a powerful industry in the field of security technology destined for border manage-

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.mup.hr/main.aspx?id=220928> (16 February 2016).

ment and control. The author called it “the industry of illegality” and “a global business” whose major beneficiaries were the defence and security industries and smugglers (Andersson, 2014).

Due to massive refugee migration of 2015, the surveillance of outer EU borders was suspended and people were allowed to enter practically without any controls. The European fortress allowed free movement of people, by which it enabled a hitherto hindered aspect of globalisation. It is noteworthy in that respect that the German Prime Minister called the immigration process that we are witnessing “an aspect of globalisation”. If we define globalisation (cf. Taylor, 2011) as the unfettered crossing of borders by people, goods and ideas, we will notice that the economic and cultural borders have long lost their meaning as an outcome of globalisation processes, while the political borders continue to be highly monitored, particularly if they are located on the dividing lines between economically unequal worlds and are approached by a certain type of mobile people – refugees and migrants motivated by poverty, conflicts or natural disasters or those who are seeking employment. It has proved impossible to implement harsh border control in a context of mass migration flows, under the political circumstances of the long-term war in Syria and the decisions by certain European states that they would accept refugees from Syria. Hence, this exceptional migration has realised the final key aspect of the globalisation process – movement of people – of those “undesirable migrants” – across what were until recently rigid EU borders. It occurred despite demands from certain member states for a halt to be called to this process of global mobility.

In Croatia, as elsewhere, the state border, that place of control and symbol of national sovereignty, has been suspended in face of the mass nature of the refugee groups, while control and registration have been relocated inside national territory, in a reception centre located some fifteen kilometres from the state border.

## **THE SECURITY-SCAPE AND THE INVISIBILITY OF THE REFUGEES**

The reception centre was managed by the Operations Centre of the Ministry of Internal Affairs headed up by the minister. The refugees were met at different spots at the border with Serbia and driven to the centre, where they were registered and assisted in various ways (refreshments and clothing were distributed, urgent medical care and, if necessary, psychological assistance were given, etc.).

On average, five to six thousand people arrived at the centre every day, and on some days at the end of October a record was set of over ten thousand arrivals. The stay of the refugees at the centre lasted several hours, ten hours at the most. On exit, they were boarding the buses for transport to the destinations agreed upon between Croatia and the neighbouring countries (Hungary and Slovenia). A column of some twenty to thirty buses formed in front of the reception centre two to three times every day. While the column was being formed, the refugees were not allowed to leave the buses, wait outside or stroll around the village. The system of monitoring was designed so that the refugees would be completely out of the way of the local population.

The reception centre functioned as an extra-territorial system: part of the village was excluded from the surrounding area and transformed into a border transit area, similar to those at international airports and maritime harbours. As in those places, it was here that arrivals and departures of refugees were registered and personal documents (if people had any) were checked. A part of the local territory temporarily became a transit zone, a *non-place* for the refugees (Augé, 1994) – an area used only instrumentally and temporarily. Because of its separation from the remainder of the village by iron fences and the impossibility to enter it, the locals colloquially called it “the camp”.

There were only a few signs of the refugees’ presence outside the reception centre itself and the entry area. The signs indicating exceptional circumstances were the cars of the workers at the centre and of visitors to the centre and of the media, parked at the foreseen parking area and on the nearby fields – and the booming business at the local bar. There was a traffic jam during periods of forming the bus columns on the roads in front of the reception centre for transfer of the refugees to further destinations, and the villagers who lived in the immediate vicinity complained. When the bus columns transporting the refugees were passing on the road, the villagers’ cars had to wait for up to fifteen minutes before they could leave their courtyards. Two things indicated that something was going on in the neighbouring village of Tovarnik and its surroundings: two UNHCR tents placed in front of the house in which that organisation had set up an office, and the traffic lights at the central intersection that were turned off, so that the buses carrying the refugees could pass through without stopping.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> That provoked joking comments among the locals about how they had switched off the traffic lights so that the buses carrying the refugees would not stop in their village. The reaction with humour was a typical way of the local inhabitants’ coping with the refu-

Thus, the Opatovac reception centre would seem to have successfully implemented the government's plan to facilitate the transit of refugees and monitor their movements. It can be seen from the statement given by the Minister of Internal Affairs that both undertakings were aimed at maintaining the security of Croatian citizens and, something that was emphasised more rarely, the security of the refugees themselves because of the potential danger from land-mines in the fields of eastern Croatia (land-mines still being cleared after the war of the 1990s). The Minister of Internal Affairs stated on September 28 that the Republic of Croatia did not have on its territory "even one refugee who was not under the monitoring of the police force",<sup>23</sup> while a few days earlier he had said that the security of Croatia's citizens "had not fallen even an iota".<sup>24</sup> Those were messages directed to Croatian citizens, particularly the local inhabitants who, according to media news, had been alarmed during the first few days of disorganised reception of refugees.<sup>25</sup> It was for that reason that the state construed and constructed the reception centre "security-scape" (cf. Lauth Bacas, 2014: 163) in which the refugees were displaced from the concrete locality and, most of the time, invisible to the local population. Efforts were made to keep them in that transit zone in order to minimise their encounters with the villagers and to avoid any possible threats that could stem from such encounters. Saying that "life had returned to normal" since the reception centre had been opened and that "everything had become channelled, tidy and good", the majority of the local inhabitants with whom I spoke confirmed that the state security plan had succeeded.

The Minister of Internal Affairs and the Prime Minister also stressed that humaneness was a motivating factor in their activities. The intention at the reception centre was to create "more humane conditions" for the refugees.<sup>26</sup> This gave grounds to the government to present Croatia as a "civilised country" that did not put up walls and wire fences but rather wanted to help the refugees, together with countries like Germany and Austria, and unlike countries like Hungary.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the centre operated smoothly and

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gee presence in their area (Čapo, 2015). It has been established that the inhabitants in the localities directly exposed to the refugee migration showed sympathy, empathy and solidarity with the refugees. This finding challenges both the wide-spread opinion about the xenophobia of Croatia's citizens and the need for state security discourse and practice when dealing with refugees.

<sup>23</sup> Source: HINA Sept. 28, 2016. NEWS-H9288655:1

<sup>24</sup> Source: HINA Sept. 23, 2016. NEWS-H9237967:1

<sup>25</sup> Source: HINA Sept. 17, 2016. NEWS-H9176855:1

<sup>26</sup> Source: HINA Sept. 20, 2016. NEWS-H9207408:1

<sup>27</sup> Source: HINA Spet. 22, 2016. NEWS-H9227682:1

showed a humane face. Non-governmental national and international organisations and governmental institutions were engaged 24 hours in caring for and helping the refugees. The local inhabitants who worked at the centre were commenting on the humaneness of everybody engaged at the centre, including the police.

Let us take a look at how the aspiration towards the creation of more humane conditions at the reception centre had a reverse side.

## **SPECTACULAR VISIBILITY OF THE REFUGEES AND THE LIMITS OF HUMANENESS**

Despite the efficient functioning of the reception centre as the transit area blocked off from contact with the locals, the refugee population was becoming visible from time to time and that in a disturbing way, both to the local population and to all the citizens of Croatia through the media. The situation would get out of control when certain transit parameters were being changed, concretely, at the moment when Hungary rejected further acceptance of refugees in mid-October, so that Croatia was obliged to re-route them to Slovenia, which was not prepared to accept a large number of people.

The crisis command headquarters then decided to slow down transit through the Opatovac reception centre, although increasingly large groups of refugees were arriving at the border. This was done in a way that refugees waiting on the border with Serbia were no longer allowed to cross the border at the customary rate and were kept there. According to the opinions of several staff members at the reception centre, in that way “humane conditions were ensured” at the centre itself, the area of complete police supervision: the centre was not over-capacitated, thus ensuring its functioning and cleaning, and maintenance of balance between the number of people arriving and leaving. The aspiration for humane treatment within the reception centre, paradoxically, had the undesirable consequence of dehumanisation outside of that fenced and supervised area. Outside the centre, in the border area and no-man’s-land, things got out of hand and the refugees burst through the police cordon and forced uncontrolled entry into Croatia. “Control with a human face” maintained through the establishment of the Opatovac reception centre showed itself to be flimsy. It showed its other face: lack of control, violence and repression on the border. There was a *mêlée* at the border: hundreds of refugees crossed the state border despite the police, making their way across the fields as in the first days

of entry into Croatia. They got lost on the way, walked across the fields and along the roads, the local road traffic was stopped or hindered, while the surrounding villages became a stage and backdrop to unpleasant scenes as the rain-drenched, freezing, muddy and barefoot men walked along the road in groups of some fifty people escorted by the police. Because they had broken through the police cordons in an uncontrolled manner, outside of the set framework, the police forced the men to walk from the border to the reception centre. The refugees became the object of “state-sanctioned violence” (Andersson, 2014) and were subjected to degrading inhumane treatment (cf. Lauth Bacas, 2014).

A young Syrian from a group of men walking from the border to the reception centre on October 19 approached the car that my driver had to stop to allow the group to pass. The young man introduced himself as a doctor and, obviously upset and bitter, hoping that we were journalists, told us in a mixture of English and German how degradingly they were being treated, having been forced to wait at the border crossing where there were no humane conditions, and being forced to walk after that. He definitely wanted that event to be transmitted by the media, hoping that what had happened to them would be condemned, and that Croatia would be obliged to treat the refugees more humanely. The next day, at the reception centre, another Syrian felt the need to speak out about his humiliation the previous day:

*We were walking for eight hours, and the buses were behind us empty, they refused to take us in the bus, we walked from Serbia to here, under the rain and we were freezing and no-one took us... They took the children and women, not us... We begged police for buses, buses were crossing beside us empty, and no-one took us... They are savage, I told a policeman on the road, I told them that God is watching us, is watching him.*

The border had become a “scene of spectacle” (De Genova, 2013: 1182). Even if it was not transformed into “a landscape of death” (Nevins, 2002 according to De Genova, 2013), the refugees did suffer additional trauma to their already traumatic experience of being refugees on their way to the desired destinations: they lived through the separation of families, the disappearance of family members, the cold, the feeling of humiliation. At the same time, the border as the “wild zone of power” (Buck-Morss, 2000 according to De Genova, 2013) became a fertile terrain for sanctioning impatient people.

Paradoxically then, the hyper-controlled system at the extra-territorial reception centre, which did show a humane face, generated the very op-

posite on its most sensitive margins, the state border. I argue that this is the outcome of factors related to the security and humanitarian aspects of the monitoring system put in place on the one hand, and, on the other, to the absence of international coordination. The border is an interactive area, and unlike the reception centre that was fully under the control of the Croatian police, the border, paradoxically enough, was not: the events there depended on the co-operation between and the success of political negotiations with neighbouring states – both those on the eastern border with Serbia and even more those on the western, Schengen border with Slovenia. The national framework for “solving the crisis” was completely ineffective when isolated from the inter- and trans-national context and co-operation. Because of the fissures in key inter-state agreements on transit, a particularly traumatic and dehumanising situation arose for the refugees.

Refugees who had been invisible to that point suddenly became extremely visible in local everyday life at the very moment of the escalation of their suffering. That invoked the criticism of humanitarian organisations, but also of the local authorities, as events concealed from the public until then flowed over in their most negative aspects into the public sphere. Although it had otherwise been fully excluded from helping the refugees, the local (district) administration then reacted promptly, calming the upset local people and calling on them to collect items needed by the frozen and bare-footed people at the reception centre.

At the moment of the loss of control, another uncomfortable thing occurred for the managers of the crisis: at just that “sad photogenic instance” (Feldman, 2014: 62), the refugees were the most interesting item for media presentation. Thus, on the basis of an exceptional situation and event, an unbalanced image of the management of refugee transit was created in the media, providing an excellent opportunity for unfounded criticism of the humaneness of the entire reception system.<sup>28</sup>

## **INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION – AN UNFINISHED STORY**

This article has analysed a fragment of the exceptional and very dynamic migration situation in Croatia and the EU over the period from mid-September to the beginning of November, 2015 and more particularly in the second half of October. The focus has been on analysis of the functioning of the reception centre at Opatovac and on managing refugee transit in Croatia. In

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<sup>28</sup> Media reporting of the refugee flow co-created the whole event and it would be worthwhile to analyse it separately.

the period that I have described, the contradictions contained in the nexus of security and humanitarian demands in managing refugee transit were particularly prominent because of the lack of international agreements – or their being ignored – and of solidarity between the states involved.

The analysis has emphasised the complexity involved in managing the refugee situation. I have interpreted that complexity as a series of contradictions and paradoxes in the Croatian state response to the arrival of a large number of refugees. Firstly, management of the migration flow suspended the border control on the Croatian border (also an outer border of the EU) and set it up in the transit area of the reception centre located some fifteen kilometres from the actual border. Secondly, the security technique of spatial isolation (fencing in the refugees) with the purpose of controlling what the security discourse saw as a potentially dangerous element in the social fabric, only partly ensured their complete invisibility in the society. Thirdly, the aspiration for humane treatment of the refugees within the reception centre had the undesirable consequence of dehumanisation outside that area, at the state border. Following unsuccessful co-operation between the states on the refugee route, cracks appeared at that neuralgic point of the reception system and the refugees who had been largely invisible until then became spectacularly visible.

Those complexities in the Croatian management of the refugee flow should be understood in the light of the fundamental contradiction of the Croatian *qua* EU border regime. It is stretched between opposing tendencies of security and humanitarian issues: on the one hand, we have the repressive application of the law and control (policing) of the national and also outer borders of the EU and, on the other, the ethical demands for humanness and respect for universal human rights (Andersson, 2014, 2015). Other key variables for understanding the events are the mass nature and intensity of the refugee flow, along with the incapability of EU member states – and the states on the migrant route – to arrive at consensus and agreement on common politics and measures.

Although it is impossible to deal with a trans-national process within isolated national frameworks that has constantly been occurring due to the impossibility of achieving inter-state co-operation. Therefore, it is fair to say that the EU has contributed to the deepening of the humanitarian migration crisis, while demonstrating its own profound political crisis. With the dearth of agreement and solidarity between EU member states, both the future organisation and profile of the EU have been brought into question – as said by the Croatian European parliamentarian referred to at the beginning

of the article – along with the issue of the basic values of the EU: respect for human rights, humaneness, democracy and freedom of movement.

At the moment of completing this article at the beginning of November 2015, the reception centre in Opatovac ceased operating: the entire infrastructure for reception and care of the refugees in transit was relocated to Slavonski Brod, the winter reception centre. As agreed between Serbia and Croatia, and Slovenia and Croatia, trains will travel directly from Šid in Serbia to Slavonski Brod and from there to Dobova in Slovenia, setting up a humanitarian corridor on the territories of three countries. That could mean that the dehumanising situation that I have described here will not be repeated. However, just exactly how the migration process and the accompanying humanitarian crisis will develop is very uncertain, and depends, it seems, largely on international factors, on coordination between the states on the migrant route, and co-operation at the level of the entire EU (cf. Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies, 2015). Consequently, the most logical thing to do is to leave the conclusion to this story open.

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## **Sigurnosni krajolik i (ne)vidljivost izbjeglica: upravljanje izbjegličkim tokom kroz Hrvatsku**

Jasna Čapo

### SAŽETAK

Rad analizira neke aspekte iznimnoga migracijskog procesa što se odvijao u Europi od polovine rujna do početka studenoga 2015. Usredotočuje se na analizu upravljanja tom migracijom u Hrvatskoj kroz prikaz funkcioniranja prihvatnoga centra za izbjeglice u Opatovcu. Primjenjuju se kvalitativno etnografsko istraživanje i antropološki pristup. Etnografska perspektiva nudi kompleksno viđenje odgovora na događaje, upućujući na paradokse u upravljanju migracijom u Hrvatskoj. Ustvrdjuje se da je kontradiktornost sadržana u neksusu sigurnosnih i humanitarnih zahtjeva upravljanja migracijskim procesom stalno prisutna, a ponajviše dolazi do izražaja zbog međudržavne nesuradnje te jasnoga stava i zajedničke politike EU-a. Time je EU pridonio produbljivanju humanitarne migracijske krize, ali i izložio vlastitu duboku krizu vrijednosti.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: izbjeglice, migranti, sigurnost, humanost, Hrvatska, EU