Balkan Beats: Migrations, Stories, and Memories

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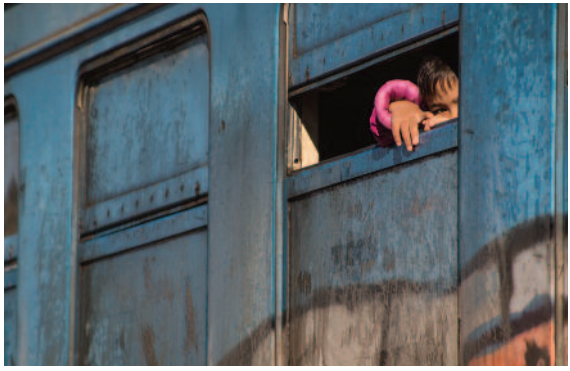
1. Preface

Since the refugee crisis began in the summer of 2015, hundreds of thousands of refugees have crossed the Middle East and the Balkans on their way to Northern and Western Europe to escape wars, violence, and despair in their homelands. However, public attention has focused primarily on specific locations within their travels, such as the Greek islands or the Hungarian border. Though the situations in these places are often extreme, the problems refugees face do not end once they leave them, but evolve as they continue on through the Balkans. Because of the limited media coverage, little attention is paid to a large portion of the migrants' journeys. From walking hundreds of miles to smugglers and closed borders, the Balkan route offers an entirely new set of difficulties that refugees must face in order to reach their desired destinations.



"Balkan Beats: Migration, Stories, and Memories" is a series of portraits and stories captured during my field experience in the Balkans from October 2015 until April 2016. Working as a volunteer in a refugee camp in Belgrade and then as a researcher for a Serbian non-governmental organization (NGO), I had the opportunity to travel all across the Balkans, to see the reality in the field, and to meet with the refugees. During my trips, all my feelings were mixed as I experienced funny situations, heard incredible stories, saw smiling children playing around, or, to the contrary, faced hopeless people and confronted hard moments while working in a constant state of emergency. After months in the snow, in the mud, under the rain and the sun, I decided

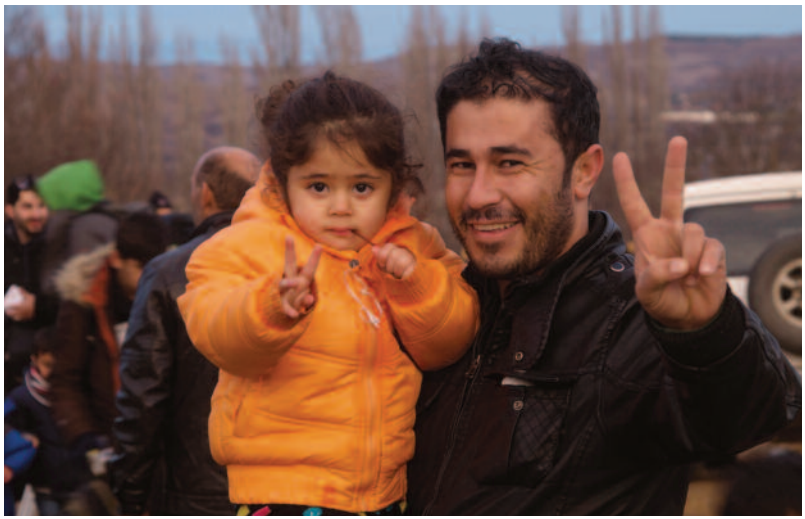
to write the stories of those migrants. By getting closer to the refugees, diving into their travels, their challenges, and their emotions, I tried to give a voice to those who faced this migration process but remained ignored as to their motivations since the media generally focused on the mass, not on individuals. In order to protect their privacy and security, I decided to change the names of the people from my stories, but their words remain true. These stories are a short snapshot of all the moments I experienced there. I offer one story and one photo per place I worked, usually at main border crossings. Those stories are just a few that I picked from hundreds that I could have written.

Thank you and all the best to all of those I got the chance to meet, from refugees to NGO workers, from citizens of the Balkans to volunteers. I did not know what to expect before going there, but now I can say that those moments with you were a storm for my soul!

2. Dimitrovgrad: First Step into the Balkans

Spotted in the forest at the border between Bulgaria and Serbia, a group of refugees is rescued by the mobile units of an NGO and brought to the registration center in Dimitrovgrad. Immediately after exiting the vans they are directed to the area where hot food and drinks are distributed. Women rest their bags on the ground and the men light their cigarettes as the children eat the chips and Chinese noodles that they were given. This group of fifty Iraqis crossed the border on foot with smugglers before being left to their fate once they reached Serbian territory. Several days of walking in harsh conditions were necessary in order for the group, which included children, women, and the elderly, to reach its goal. “They were lucky not to be bothered by the mafias while crossing the border. It happens often, and the police sometimes participate,” explains a volunteer before adding, “When the mafia catches a refugee they take their money and valuables. Sometimes they also sequester them and ask the family to pay for their release. It’s a dirty business that takes advantage of human misery. Unfortunately, the Bulgarian state does not do much to change the situation.”

The Iraqis are grouped in a corner of the camp, sitting on their bags, holding their heads in their hands. One that seems to be the leader of the group approaches us and asks for information about the rest of



the trip: "Some people just told us that the borders are closed to refugees and that we should go to the [refugee] center of Krnjaca in Belgrade. You know more?" After we confirm his statement about the closure of the borders an old man comes to see us. "What can we do now? We all come from the same village in northern Iraq and we decided to leave together for fear of ISIS. We are Yezidis, and many of our people have been killed or abducted to serve as slaves. How can you let us stay here? You must help us! Look what they did to me!" he says as he pulls up his pant leg, showing us the burned skin on his leg. Behind them we see the faces of the women, huddled in worry over the agitation of the two men. Some of the women start crying when the situation is explained to them. One of them comes to us, her eyes red, and says: "What do you want us to do? We cannot return to Iraq, our village is probably destroyed now. . . . Germany cannot let us down."

The children continue to play while their parents, haggard, discuss the situation and the options they have: stay in Serbia and possibly seek asylum or try to cross the border into Croatia illegally, possibly with a smuggler, and with the hope of not being deported by the police. How-

ever, the most pressing matter at the moment is to reach Belgrade, either by bus or train. The group heads toward the station, following the lead of the volunteer who took charge of buying the tickets and distributing a food package to each individual. As they leave the camp, the women dry their tears, the men rekindle their cigarettes, and the children, all dressed in clean clothes, start on another bag of dried noodles.

3. Presevo: For My Tranquility, I Left

A man approaches me near the exit of the registration center of Presevo, a train ticket in hand. "Sir, a Syrian family gave me a train ticket since they finally decided to go to Šid by bus. It is a ticket for two people, and I am alone. Do you know someone who would like to come with me? It would be a pity if it is not used." This young Afghan, with a serene appearance, explains that he left his country two months ago, walked across the Iranian border, avoided police violence and mafia thieves, used the bus, and hitchhiked to Turkey.

From there he took a boat to get to the Greek islands. "It's the trip of a lifetime, this is the trip of my lifetime. I went through all the emotions, all the adventures, swung between joy and fear. I met bad people on the road, but I have also met very good ones. Look, that is Karl, from Denmark, and Philipp, from Germany, who helped me when I was in Greece," says Wasim while showing me, on his mobile phone, a picture of himself, a small brown man with a jovial face, standing in the middle of two blond giants. "They gave me their contact so I can write them when I come to Germany."

After several minutes of searching in vain for someone to accompany him, he decides to follow me into the tent of a relief agency

where they will give him something to eat and drink before he embarks on the long night of travel. "I have not found anyone yet. Either they already have a ticket, or they are many and have no desire to separate, or they do not have a valid document and cannot take public transportation," he disappointedly says to me. In the tent a volunteer gives him his meal for the evening: a cup of hot tea, a bottle of water, two slices of bread, a boiled egg, a packet of biscuits, and three clementines. His bag on his back and food in hand, he follows me outside of the tent and sits down in a chair beside a brazier placed near the tracks of the railroad. He drinks his tea silently, staring at the flames dancing in the fire. Upon leaving I tell him he can go rest in the tent if he desires, but he politely declines, saying that he will stay by the fire to read. In response to my question about the book he is reading, he pulls his cell phone from his jacket pocket. Upon its unlocking an image of Jesus Christ appears in the background. He clicks on a PDF file and tells me: "This is the New Testament, I read it every day. I turned to Christianity several years ago, but my choice is not accepted in my country. In Islam, it is forbidden to convert to another religion, some are willing to kill you if you do so. For my life and for my tranquility, I left."

In the early morning, while returning to the registration center, I meet Wasim again. He is still sitting near the brazier, his head bent over his phone. When he sees me, his face lights up: "The midnight train was canceled, so I stayed here and slept a little in the tent. I'll take the ten o'clock train scheduled to leave in a few minutes. I'm hoping it is not canceled this time. Unfortunately, I asked other people if they need a ticket, but I could not find anyone to come with me." With a warm handshake he says, "Thanks for helping, my friend. I hope our paths will cross again. May God protect you!"

4. Belgrade: Love for All, Hatred for None

It is almost ten in the morning in the Miksaliste help center as coordinators finish preparing the different sectors, foods, clothes, shoes, before opening the site to refugees who have already amassed at the entrance,

their faces pressed against the fences. Volunteers who came to help that day are conversing, gathered outside the central tent, waiting to find out where they will be needed. Among the Czechs, Americans, and Germans is Qamar, a thirty-four-year-old Pakistani. In hesitant German, he tells me his experience in Austria. "I spent several months in Austria after having applied for asylum. I started to learn German and I still continue here," he says, pointing to his exercise book. "But they did not go through with the request since my fingerprints were recorded first in Bulgaria. They deported me there because that's where I have to make the request, but I do not want to stay there as the conditions are terrible for refugees. I returned to Serbia and now I have to wait three months to return to Austria." While waiting out that period he has been coming to the center at Miksaliste every morning for more than a month and serves tea and coffee to refugees.

In the back of the tent, next to his drawings on which are written his motto, "Love for All, Hatred for None," he distributes drinks non-stop, responding with humor to those who are a little bit too eager and flock to his table, demanding more sugar and continuing to call him "Pakistani" in spite of his presence in the center for over a month. He tells me, "I fled Pakistan several months ago because I am an Ahmadi, a persecuted religious minority in my country. My family has been affected by the violence suffered by my community. My wife and my three children still live there, waiting to join me here in Europe." He explains that "Ahmadiyya is a reformist movement in Islam founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad. He came to restore Islam in its purity because it is the savior announced by Mohammed who was to return to earth in the thirteenth century after the prophet's death. For us, Jesus is not the son of God but his messenger, and he is not in heaven either. He had been taken down from the cross by his disciples, and after he woke he went to India where

he lived until his death at the age of one hundred twenty." It is from the Ahmadi movement that Qamar took his motto: "Everything must be love on earth. We must turn to the other with understanding and compassion. Violence has no place among us." He is surprised that his religion can be transformed into a message of hate and death by the Islamic State or by other aggressive groups persecuting Ahmadis in Pakistan.

With his green volunteer badge around the neck and little beard well cared for, he stays active throughout the day, caring for the refugees who quickly gobble up the small bags of food distributed in the morning and who, from time to time, drink a few sips of tea never sweet enough for their taste. He wanders into the tent to clean the tables and put the food that has not been finished in the garbage bin. In the late afternoon, after a day without a break, he returns to the Krnjaca refugee center in the outskirts of Belgrade, his backpack on his shoulder. As he slowly walks away from Miksaliste, limping slightly, he turns and, with a wave of the hand and a large smile, bids everyone "Bis morgen!"

5. Šid: Our Only Option Is Germany

In the bitter cold of winter, a mass of refugees slowly strolls under a large tent where two tall police officers are thoroughly examining their registration documents before letting them access the platform of the train that will take them to Slavonski Brod in Croatia. Only a few hours after their arrival in Šid, Serbia, these women and men are back on the road, luggage on their backs, passports in hand, and fatigue on their faces. About ten meters away from the tent four shadows are waiting by the entrance of the station, blankets draped on their shoulders, their hoods covering their heads, staring at the queue facing the doors of the train. Unlike the other refugees, these four men

are from Sri Lanka and are not allowed to board the train. "The police did not let us get on the train because we do not come from Syria, Afghanistan, or Iraq. Even when we begged them to let us pass. They told us that in any case, if it's not them, it will be the Croatian police that will stop us and return us here, to Šid," explains Nalaka, the only one among them who speaks English. It has been five days since their arrival at the center near the train station in Šid. Soon they will be sent to Belgrade where their case will be handled. "We tried to cross the border on foot, but we were caught by a police patrol. We will be sent to Belgrade in a few days. Until then we come to attend train boardings, in case there happens to be a small flaw. We know the train schedules by heart!" he adds, laughing.

There are more and more people like them, trapped in Serbia, unable to cross the border and go further to Germany. Since mid-November of 2015, the countries of the European Union have tightened controls, restricting access to all except those from countries such as Syria or Iraq. For these Sri Lankans it is impossible to lie about their origin in order to try to blend in, because, as one said, "We have too dark skin and we do not speak Farsi, Pashto, or Arabic." For them, the only possible legal options are to seek asylum in Serbia or to return home voluntarily. But neither of the two is possible for them. "We spent a lot of money to come here, more than six thousand euros per person for transportation, smugglers, food. Our families depend on us to support them and to send them money. Going back home would be a failure that our families would struggle to accept." What about seeking asylum in Serbia? "Firstly, they would not give it to us as there is no longer an official civil war going on in Sri Lanka, even if, in reality, Tamils continue to be persecuted. And, secondly, we do not want to stay here. We came to Europe to work and to send money to our families. Here in Serbia it is almost impossible to find a job and wages are about three to three hundred fifty euros per month. It is less than in Sri Lanka! What interest would I have to come here?"

The stationmaster's whistle sounds in the night, attracting the attention of the four men who turn to look at the departure of the train which they are not on. The refugees on board are happily waving to the staff

left on the ground, arms sticking out of windows as the engine roars. The lights of the train slowly disappear over the horizon, bringing in their wake the screeching of the rail. When the silence comes back, the translator of the group of Sri Lankans joins me, his head covered and face close to mine. He looks around at the platform which has suddenly become empty before saying, "The departing scenes are repeating daily for us, without knowing if one day we will be able to sit in one of those trains. I will have a Skype talk with my dad tomorrow. I will tell him about my situation and I will see how he reacts, but I am under no illusion. . . . My only option is Germany."

6. Opatovac: This Exile May Be a Chance

As the sun rises after a cold night at the Opatovac camp life slowly blooms again, pulling crowds out of hibernation. The first pink lights of dawn scattered across the horizon fade as half-awake refugees, muscles frozen by the cold, prepare for departure, standing at the gates of the tents that served as their shelter for the night. Bags ready, they slowly drink hot tea and firmly stand near each other to warm themselves. Volunteers quickly distribute some fruits and biscuits to children through the fences that separate the refugees. An old man asks me in French when they are going to leave: "We spent the night here, but I did not sleep as I feared missing the departure." As his granddaughter clings to his leg he explains that "only the two of us are left. We plan to join my son, her father, who is in Germany. She has no other family in Syria, me neither. ISIS and Bashar have done their butchers' work." Behind me a group of refugees is moving toward the buses which are waiting for them at the exit of the camp. Their eyes look tiredly at those still cloistered around them. "We are eager to arrive in Germany. Travel is exhausting, especially for her," he says, stroking her head.

A few minutes after the departure of the first group of refugees, a policeman comes to the second zone, opens the barrier and, with a loud voice, requests a line "all in a row, I just want to see one head." Plastic cups fall to the mud and the crowd comes to life, jostling, forming one disorganized cluster where everyone is trying to be the first on the bus.

"One line," yells the police officer again, without success. At the forefront, the grandfather contemplates the scene testily, brooding through his beard nervously and adjusting his big hat. The little man looks at the policeman then looks back behind him. He removes his backpack, which he gives to his granddaughter, and leaves his place to go organize the line himself. While performing large gestures with his plastic bag, he shouts "*Jala*, *jala*!" He speaks in a cheerful voice to other refugees, "Go, make a line, go, *jala*." With his hands he arranges, pushing the recalcitrant back into rank, encouraging them to take a place, using "*jala*" and "one line" many times. After a minute of stirring a fine line is established before the gate. He returns to the front of the row, takes his bag from the hands of his granddaughter, looks at the policeman, and says with a big smile, "Well, we're a line, we can go!"

One by one they come out from behind the fence, grabbing the water bottles being handed to them by volunteers. Close to the exit of the camp a policeman stops the line in order to count them. The grandfather, whom I follow, says: "We are on the road again. I have a lot of hope for my little girl. I want her to become a doctor one day, like her grandfather, and hope she returns to our country to help rebuild it. All these young people who are exiled must take the opportunity to learn, to bring their knowledge back home. This exile may be a chance, if we accept what Europe has to give us. They should be the future and the light of Syria, a bridge between East and West. Thank you sir for what you do." The police officer finishes counting and sends them in groups of fifty to the already waiting buses. They quickly go in and take a seat side by side.

The grandfather, who failed to sleep during the night, slumps onto his seat and falls asleep in an instant, his mouth wide open and head leaning against the window.

7. Dobova: From the East to the West—Musical Migration

It is a peaceful day in the transit camp of Dobova. Buses follow each other in the camp and release their flood of refugees who get in line, first to take food and drink, and then to go to the big tent to register to receive an authorization to remain in Slovenia. Among these people are many families and men from different backgrounds. All are fleeing war and violence in Syria and Afghanistan and hoping to find in Europe the conditions of life they can no longer find at home. In the queue I meet Amin and Sarah, a young Syrian couple awaiting their turn to register with the police. They tell me that they come from Salamyah in the west of the country but that they had been living in Damascus for three years in order to study music at the conservatory: "We left Syria to flee Assad and Daesh, fifty-fifty. Our parents encouraged us to leave. They stayed there because our grandparents cannot make the trip; unfortunately they are too old."

We separate for ten minutes, the time needed for them to register, before ending up in the rest area. "We left from Turkey on Saturday, twelve hundred dollars each for a place on the boat, I mean 'the boat.' It would be better to call it the large inflatable buoy on which we were twenty-five people. We left at night. You could see the black sea. The waves were huge. We got very scared. A friend of ours was driving; it was the first time he saw a boat. It took almost two hours to reach the Greek island. Now we are happy to be there five days after leaving Syria." Destination? "I hope Dresden, for the music and for its orchestra! Music is my life. Even during the trip I continued to practice, on the train and in the camps," he tells me, showing me his violin that he is carrying. "You want me to play something for you?" he asks me with a big smile. He removes the instrument from its case and begins the "Méditation" from *Thaïs* that I requested, before continuing with a cover from Fairuz, a Lebanese music star

known throughout the Arab world. Those in the camp turn their gaze to Amin. The police stop screaming, Arab translators take out their phones to capture the scene, Syrian and Lebanese sitting or lying on the ground begin to hum the well-known melody. The bow continues its course, voices accompany the instrument, smiles on the lips of the newly uprooted.

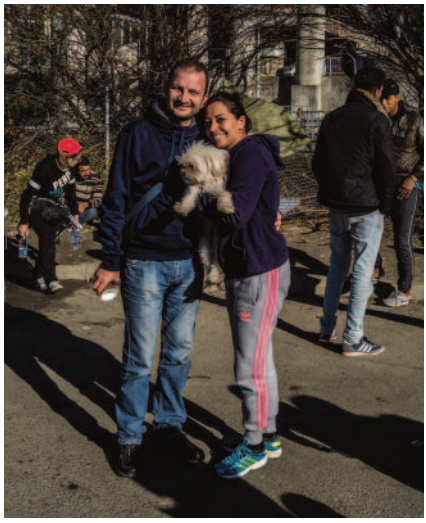
After a few unreal and calm minutes in this place more used to children crying and police shouting, the interlude is cut off by the "go, go" and "move" of the police chief who arrives to resume the departure of the buses. With strained eyes and swinging arms, the appearance of this big

body in the blue uniform of the *policija* has its effect. Amin quickly puts away his violin, translators return to the refugees, and volunteers come alive again to give one last bottle of water before departure. With just time to grab the plastic bag containing their belongings, Amin and Sarah are back on their way to Germany and their dreams of the *Staatskapelle*, the symphony orchestra of Dresden. They wave last goodbyes before the doors close and the bus starts on its route to Austria, direction Šentilj.

8. Šentilj: Last Step to Austria

In the courtyard of the Šentilj camp near the Austrian border a young couple walks slowly, holding by its leash a dog that they brought with them from Syria. A group of children follows them everywhere, hesitat-

ing yet sometimes finding enough courage to come closer and caress the little ball of white fur. "If we took the dog away from her she would become hysterical," says the husband, with a smile and sparkling eyes. With a gesture of his chin he points to the face of his wife, tense at the thought of losing her pet. "His name is Bianco. He has been part of the family for years. It was out of the question to abandon him in Syria, to leave him to the streets," says the young woman. "It was sometimes hard to travel with him but we're here now. On the way we always had to press him against us so that he wouldn't get hit. In Greece we slept in a hotel to avoid problems with other refugees." The children who seem delighted with Bianco's unusual presence in camp cause him no problems, but the Slovenian government may. As a United Nations refugee official told me, the government "is strict with veterinary controls. I hope that they have a valid passport for the dog, otherwise it will be taken."



Arriving from Aleppo with their elderly parents who are nearly in their seventies, these Christians fled the advance of ISIS and hope to "settle as quickly as possible in Europe and be able to find work in biochemistry. We have experience in this industry as we worked for Nestlé, so we should not have a problem finding a laboratory to recruit us. The important question is our choice of destination. We have family in Germany, but all refugees want to go there, just like with Sweden. We risk seeing our request refused if there are too many people who are seeking asylum. Maybe we should go to Austria or France, seeing that few refugees want to go there as they fear not finding work. They have Germany in their heads, and only Germany." For the couple there is no doubt that Angela Merkel, the chancellor of Germany, has been too loose with her statements: "They have eyes just for Merkel and ears just for her welcoming

messages, even though she changed her opinion about it a few weeks ago. They will not listen to what's new and will still stay obsessed with old promises. For us this is the time to decide on our future."

It is not easy to make such decisive choices for one's future, and it is even harder to define them considering the constant changes in information. Speeches are evolving and barriers are standing and falling. For this couple the time is short before they enter Austria, which is a few hundred meters from Šentilj camp. There they will register with the police and eventually submit their request for asylum. "Our parents would like to join our family in Germany. So if my husband and I want to stay in Austria we will have to split from them and they will have to travel alone without our help and without the certainty that they will find our family. It is a complicated choice that must be made quickly." For now the only thing of which they are sure is that they would love to go to Greece again. "It's so beautiful there. The landscape is beautiful and the people are extremely nice. And we ate the best pork chops we've had in a long time!" the woman says with an enthusiastic laugh. But when they go to visit Greece again they do not want to feel the stress and fear of traveling. They want to return in peace and walk with Bianco along the sea, as well as take time to look at the horizon without worrying about boat schedules or the threatening waves breaking on the shore, carrying death and bitterness.

Photographs by the author.