

Università degli studi di Urbino Carlo Bo

Ph.D. project proposal

Candidate: Giulia Lisdero

Ph.D. course: Global Studies. Economy, Society and Law

Dinamiche ed effetti sociali delle migrazioni e dei processi di internazionalizzazione, politiche per il welfare e per la tutela dei territori, dell'ambiente e del lavoro

Title: The response of civil society-based organizations along the Western Balkan route: how solidarity intertwines with EU policy-making

1. State of the Art

In 2015, the European Commission [reported](#) 1,82 million illegal border crossings into the EU. The impossibility of finding a political agreement on the migratory issues resulted in the European institutions outsourcing the responsibility of handling the migration flows to the non-EU countries along the route. Following a deal signed with the EU in 2016, Turkey started preventing migrants from crossing into Europe. As a result, the number of entries in the EU was reduced but not stopped, and migrants remained stranded inside transit countries in precarious conditions. The EU institutions did provide funds to help the Western Balkan countries build more solid asylum systems and reception facilities.

Nevertheless, almost none of the migrants wanted to apply for asylum outside the EU. Responding to the necessity of assisting the people on the move, a diversified archipelago of civil society-based organizations (CSOs) emerged in the area and engaged in solidarity activities. Their effort is of enormous importance, not only for the support provided to the migrants but also because of their advocacy campaigns.

Scholarly work tends to agree that the EU has not responded cohesively to the migration crisis. A report by Collett and Le Coz (2018) reports the inadequacy of the immediate crisis response enforced by the EU. In particular, Sardelić (2017) underlines how the attempt to implement a transit migration strategy proved ineffective. The failure of the proposed migrant relocation schemes and the resulting criminalization of migration is tackled by Sicurella (2017), Zaragoza-Cristiani (2017), and Cocco (2017). The fact that the

EU-Turkey deal did not seal the Balkan Route but left the migratory issue in the region unattended is clarified by a report published by Weber in 2017.

The theoretical framework needs to be enriched with a broader point of view that considers the overall approach of the EU institutions in the post-Yugoslav space. In analyzing this aspect, the books *Imagining the Balkans* (Todorova, 2009) and *Mirroring Europe: Ideas of Europe and Europeanization in Balkan Societies* (Petrović, 2014) are paramount. By coining the term *Balkanism*, Todorova's work reflects on how a specific imaginary was created around the Balkan region, which tends to be seen as underdeveloped compared to the rest of Europe and inherently prone to conflict. Building on this, Petrović reflects on how the Balkans are seen as a disadvantaged European borderland and points out the often paternalistic approach of Western Europe, which acts as if the West should save the region from itself.

Having provided a solid framework that allows preliminary context analysis, the focus can be turned to the actions of the solidarity network at the Bosnian-Croatian border. To begin with, Martin and Nolte, in two studies of 2019 and 2021, reflect on the multidimensionality and unpredictability of the migration crisis. They mention how the NGOs active along the Balkan route had to adapt to an ever-changing environment, as the crisis did not develop according to a foreseeable scheme, nor did the institutional response. A key challenge in this sense is that informal actors had to be integrated into formal crisis response mechanisms. This indeed impacts the organizational structures and efficiency of the CSOs. When facing a multidimensional crisis, CSOs need a robust organizational structure and a well-defined hierarchy to gain political leverage (Albareda, 2018). Regarding the relationship between CSOs and the institutional framework, the two themes that scholarly work considers are the possibility of CSOs acting as transmission belts on the one hand and the engagement in hostile relations with the institutions on the other. According to Albareda (2018), the necessity of collaborating with policymakers is taken for granted, but the efficiency of such partnerships depends on the organizational structure of the CSO. Lundberg (2022) focuses on instances of political confrontation with right-wing groups. According to the author, CSOs may embrace a violent approach and fail to engage in a productive dialogue. Following this approach, the study of Marturano (2021), which focused on solidarity on the Balkan Route, reports a climate of political hostility. The impossibility of dialogue with the institutions derives from a pre-existing criminalization of migration in general and active attempts at criminalizing solidarity.

2. Research Objectives

The number of people arriving in Bosnia and Herzegovina [grew](#) from 755 in 2017 to 24,067 in 2018. The Bosnian-Croatian border became one of the focal points of the Balkan route. Caught in a state of limbo, the migrants residing in Bosnia rely on the support provided by the different CSOs on the field.

This project focuses on the work of the CSOs operating at the Bosnian-Croatian border, trying to provide a deep understanding of their relationship with the EU institutions. Solidarity activities are deeply intertwined with political activism in response to an institutional approach that is deemed inadequate. The EU passed the new Migration and Asylum Pact, which envisions the implementation of more robust screening procedures and border control mechanisms. The pact is expected to have negative consequences on the respect of the fundamental rights of the migrants. As the EU member states gradually implement the pact, the relations between CSOs and the institutions are expected to keep changing.

3. Theoretical and methodological framework

This research is based on a qualitative-driven methodology. Since the focus of this research is to study the relationship of CSOs with the institutional framework, an approach that allows us to witness reality from within is to be chosen, yet always being mindful of the difficulties of generalizing qualitative results. For this reason, the study of the theoretical framework is meant to be complementary to the fieldwork. The qualitative-driven approach requires the selection of a maximum of three case studies among the various CSOs active in the selected area. The case studies will be examined using participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and standardized surveys. The periods of participant observation will coincide with periods of volunteer activity with the selected CSOs. This choice, expected to facilitate the development of trust within the group, poses ethical concerns. The perspective of a volunteer at an association that engages in advocacy activities can hardly be a neutral one: the ethnographic work will thus be an engaged one, and the political positioning of the researchers needs to be made clear throughout the research process (Jordan, 2020).

4. Research design

After studying the theoretical framework and monitoring the situation on the field (number of illegal crossings, number of pushbacks, significant evolutions in policymaking, and the CSOs' actions), it will be possible to proceed with the careful planning of the fieldwork, which includes establishing contacts with the organizations, choosing two or three case studies, and agreeing on the details of the fieldwork.

The fieldwork will be organized around periods of participant observation (one per case study, expected to last between four and six weeks). Afterwards, the semi-structured interviews and surveys can be carried out directly on the field or remotely.

The data analysis will entail coding all the qualitative material (field notes and transcripts of semi-structured interviews) and statistical analysis of the survey responses.

5. Expected results

Recent developments in the field have shown that the solidarity network at the Bosnian-Croatian border has increased its focus on advocacy campaigns, directly engaging with stakeholders in Brussels. One can expect that the political confrontation between the EU and the CSOs at the Bosnian-Croatian border will increase. In any case, whether the COSs will gain the political leverage required to have a say in EU policy-making is yet to be seen.

References

- Albareda, A. (2018). Connecting society and policymakers? Conceptualizing and measuring the capacity of civil society organizations to act as transmission belts. *Voluntas*, 29(6), 1216–1232. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-018-00051-x>
- Amnesty International. (2019). *Pushed to edge: violence and abuse against refugees and migrants along the Balkans route*.
- Bazerkoska, J. B. (2017). The refugee relocation system in EU and its implications to the countries on the Western Balkans route: the aftermath of. *La Revue Des Droits De L'homme*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.4000/revdh.3392>
- Bergesio, N., & Białasiewicz, L. (2023). The entangled geographies of responsibility: Contested policy narratives of migration governance along the Balkan Route. *Environment and Planning. D, Society and Space/Environment and Planning. D, Society & Space*, 41(1), 33–55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02637758221137345>

Border Violence Monitoring Network. (n.d.). *Testimonies archive*.
<https://borderviolence.eu/testimonies/>

Border Violence Monitoring Network. (2023a, February 2). *Introduction to the context - BVMN*. BVMN. <https://borderviolence.eu/about/the-balkan-route/>

Border Violence Monitoring Network. (2024). *Criminalization Report 2022-2023*.

Cardano, M. (2020). *Defending qualitative research: Design, Analysis, and Textualization*. Routledge.

Cocco, E. (2017). Where is the European Frontier? The Balkan Migration Crisis and its Impact on Relations between the EU and the Western Balkans. *European View*, 16(2), 293–302. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12290-017-0471-5>

Collett, E., & Le Coz, C. (2018). After the Storm: Learning from the EU response to the migration crisis. In *Migration Policy Institute*.
https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-proposes-open-eu-accession-negotiations-bosnia-and-herzegovina-and-updates-progress-made-2024-03-12_en

Corbetta, P. (2003). *Social research: Theory, Methods and Techniques*. SAGE.

Crespi, G. G., Fruscione, G., Sasso, A., Selvelli, G., & Siragusa, M. (2021). *Capire i Balcani Occidentali. Dagli accordi di Dayton ai giorni nostri* (M. Napolitano, Ed.). Bottega Errante Editore.

Fine, G. A. (2021a). *Etnografia e società*. Mimesis.

Flick, U. (2017). *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Collection*. SAGE.

Hancké, B. (2009). *Intelligent Research Design: A guide for beginning researchers in the social Sciences*. Oxford University Press.

Helms, E. (2022). Social boundaries at the EU Border: engaged ethnography and migrant solidarity in Bihać, Bosnia–Herzegovina. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 38(2), 283–301. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2022.2108109>

Hielscher, S., Winkin, J., Crack, A. M., & Pies, I. (2017). Saving the moral capital of NGOs: Identifying One-Sided and Many-Sided social dilemmas in NGO accountability. *Voluntas*, 28(4), 1562–1594. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-016-9807-z>

IOM. (2024). *Migrant Mobility Situation Report - The Western Balkans*.

Jordan, J. D., & Moser, S. (2020). Researching migrants in informal transit camps along the Balkan Route: Reflections on volunteer activism, access, and reciprocity. *Area*, 52(3), 566–574. <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12614>

Jovanović, S. M. (2017). “I Refuse to Sink”: Narratives of the dispossessed within refugee stories on the Balkan Route. *Cultural Studies/Critical Methodologies/Cultural Studies Critical Methodologies*, 18(4), 251–258. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708617737097>

Lundberg, E. (2022). Different types, different reactions? How civil society organizations respond to Right-Wing extremism. *Voluntas*, 34(5), 1002–1013.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-022-00517-z>

Martin, É., & Nolte, I. M. (2019). Might less accountability be more? INGO-Volunteer relationships in the European refugee response. *Public Management Review*, 22(3), 408–431. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2019.1599057>

Marturano, G. (2021). Sui confini della rotta balcanica: pratiche di solidarietà ai migranti e processi di criminalizzazione. *Mondi Migranti*, 3, 43–63.

<https://doi.org/10.3280/mm2021-003003>

Meijeren, M., Lubbers, M., & Scheepers, P. (2023). Assessing the ‘Why’ in volunteering for Refugees: Exploring volunteer motivations. *Voluntas*, 35(1), 129–139.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-023-00574-y>

Migratory map. (2024). Frontex.

<https://www.frontex.europa.eu/what-we-do/monitoring-and-risk-analysis/migratory-map/>

Milan, C. (2023). Emotions in Action: The role of emotions in refugee Solidarity activism^{1,2}. *Sociological Forum*, 38(3), 813–829. <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12926>

Minca, C. (2021). Makeshift camp methodologies along the Balkan Route. *Area*, 54(3), 365–373. <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12705>

Nichol, B., Wilson, R. G., Rodrigues, A., & Haighton, C. (2023). Exploring the effects of volunteering on the social, mental, and physical health and well-being of volunteers: an umbrella review. *Voluntas*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-023-00573-z>

Nolte, I. M., & Martin, É. (2021). Learning and crisis coordination: Experiences from the Balkan refugee route. *Nonprofit Management & Leadership*, 31(4), 783–804.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/nml.21457>

Parent, N. (2018). Four voices of refugee solidarity along the Balkan Route: An exploratory pilot study on motivations for mobilisation. *Migration Letters*, 15(3), 423–436.

<https://doi.org/10.33182/ml.v15i3.363>

Petrović, T. (2014). *Mirroring Europe: Ideas of Europe and Europeanization in Balkan Societies*. BRILL.

Proposta di DIRETTIVA DEL PARLAMENTO EUROPEO E DEL CONSIGLIO che stabilisce regole minime per la prevenzione e il contrasto del favoreggiamento dell'ingresso, del transito e del soggiorno illegali nell'Unione e che sostituisce la direttiva 2002/90/CE del Consiglio e la decisione quadro 2002/946/GAI del Consiglio. (2023, November 28).

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/IT/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52023PC0755>

Refworld - UNHCR's Global Law and Policy Database. (2024, February 12). *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Law No. 11 of 2016, Law on Asylum*. Refworld.

<https://www.refworld.org/legal/legislation/natlegbod/2016/en/123253>

REGOLAMENTO (UE) N. 604/2013 DEL PARLAMENTO EUROPEO E DEL CONSIGLIO
che stabilisce i criteri e i meccanismi di determinazione dello Stato membro competente per
l'esame di una domanda di protezione internazionale presentata in uno degli Stati membri
da un cittadino di un paese terzo o da un apolide (rifusione). (2013, June 26).

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/IT/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:02013R0604-20130629>
Roadmap for Cooperation EASO - Bosnia and Herzegovina (2020-2022). (2020). In EASO.

Šalamon, N. K. (2016). Asylum systems in the Western Balkan countries: Current issues.
International Migration, 54(6), 151–163. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12273>

Sardelić, J. (2017). From temporary protection to transit migration: Responses to refugee
crises along the Western Balkan Route. *Social Science Research Network*.

<https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3005923>

Sicurella, F. G. (2017). The language of walls along the Balkan Route. *Journal of Immigrant
& Refugee Studies*, 16(1–2), 57–75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2017.1309088>

Siragusa, M., Tano, L., & Tondo, L. (2022). *Capire la rotta balcanica*.

Stęпка, M. (2023). The new Pact on Migration and Asylum: another step in the EU
Migration-Security continuum or preservation of the status quo? *Białostockie Studia
Prawnicze*, 28(1), 23–37. <https://doi.org/10.15290/bsp.2023.28.01.02>

Temporary Reception Center profiles | Bosnia and Herzegovina. (2023, September). IOM.
<https://bih.iom.int/temporary-reception-center-profiles>

Todorova, M. (2009). *Imagining the Balkans*. Oxford University Press.

Wæraas, A., Sirris, S., & Hellevik, Ø. (2024). The added value of civil society organizations
in the provision of welfare state services. *Voluntas*.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-024-00639-6>

Weber, M. (2017). The EU-Turkey refugee deal and the not quite closed Balkan route.
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Dialogue Southeast Europe.

Weima, Y., & Brankamp, H. (2022). Camp methodologies: The “how” of studying camps.
Area, 54(3), 338–346. <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12787>

Zaragoza-Cristiani, J. (2017). Containing the Refugee Crisis: How the EU turned the Balkans
and Turkey into an EU borderland. *The International Spectator/International Spectator*,
52(4), 59–75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2017.1375727>

Zocchi, B. (2023). The game: ritualized exhaustion and subversion on the Western Balkan
route. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 1–21.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2023.2229846>

