Refugees at the Gates of the EU: Civic Initiatives and Grassroots Responses to the Refugee Crisis along the Western Balkans Route

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ABSTRACT

The countries of former Yugoslavia have a long history of dealing with refugees. However, what had been termed in the media and in public discourse as the '2015-16 European migrant crisis' represented a phenomenon of unprecedented scale for the Western Balkan states. For the first time since the break-up of Yugoslavia, these countries found themselves handling a steep increase in arrivals of migrants who fled from the Middle East and Africa and crossed the Western Balkans migratory route in an attempt to reach Northern and Central Europe. To compensate for the lack of action on the part of their governments, since summer 2015 a number of individuals and domestic groups mobilized with the purpose of providing humanitarian assistance to migrants crossing their territory. Based on a series of in-depth interviews with key informants, this article explores the multiple solidarity initiatives organized at the local and transnational level along the Western Balkans route during the 2015-16 migrant crisis, taking Serbia and Macedonia as case studies. Specifically, the study examines the extent to which emotional resources and discursive opportunities increased the prospects for altruistic mobilization in a context characterized by a low level of grassroots civic activism.

Introduction

The former Yugoslav states have traditionally been considered countries of emigration. In particular from 1975 onwards, internal migratory movements drove people from southern Yugoslavia to become guest-workers in Slovenia. Later on, the aftermath of the 1992-95 conflicts pushed thousands of citizens of the former Yugoslav republics to migrate to Northern European countries like Germany, Sweden and Austria in search of jobs and safety. As a consequence of the war, also the number of civilians forced to flee their homes to seek a safe haven in neighbouring towns and states increased dramatically. The UNHCR defines them as Internally Displaced People (IDPs), as these individuals migrated within the borders of their own country and remained under the protection of their government, even though the latter was the reason for their displacement.[1] As of late 2014, the number of IDPs and refugees estimated to be still present in Bosnia-Herzegovina was around 100,000,[2] a figure that in Serbia amounted to 97,000 in May 2015.[3] Over summer 2015, the territories

of the former Yugoslav countries were in the media limelight for being crossed in record-breaking numbers by people fleeing from the Middle East and Africa seeking protection in the European Union (EU). In an attempt to reach Northern and Central Europe, migrants travelled along the Western Balkans route, one of the most popular migratory paths leading to the EU. The European Commission estimated that nearly 700,000 people had travelled across the route by the end of October 2015, the figure reaching 760,000 by the end of December of the same year.[4] What the media termed the '2015-16 European migrant[5] crisis' represented thus a challenge of unprecedented scale for countries still dealing with internal displacement from the 1990s conflicts, and affected for the first time in their post-war history by such a massive influx of people.

The growth in the migration flow along the European trail had profound effects on the former Yugoslav countries, which found themselves on one of the main refugee routes. Holding a crucial geographical position at the borders of the EU, the Western Balkan states turned into countries of transit for migrants passing through Turkey and Greece in the first place. While, on the one hand, the refugee crisis is said to have put the countries of former Yugoslavia 'back on the political map of Europe',[6] and has stressed 'the strategic importance of the region for the EU's stability and security',[7] on the other it has negatively impacted the relations among them, accentuating the lack of cooperation among policy-makers in the region.[8] The high number of arrivals at the EU borders represented a challenge for state institutions, which proved ill-prepared to face it, as well as to provide state protection and appropriate reception structures. At the transnational level, tensions between neighbourhood governments escalated during summer 2015, the peak of the migration crisis. A case in point is the controversy between Serbia and Croatia, which culminated in the closure of the Croatian border to Serbian goods,[9] and into the Croatian veto on Serbia opening chapters 23 and 24 of its EU accession process.[10]

Confronted with the complex effects posed by the significant number of refugees, at the national level government officials reacted unevenly. A shifting attitude characterized the response of the Macedonian authorities, the first non-EU country at the Southern EU border.[11] At first, in early 2015, government officials prohibited migrants from boarding public transport to cross the country's territory, and periodically shut the Greek border crossings in an attempt to stem the flow of people. A couple of months after permitting migrants to legally use the country's public transportation system, in August 2015 Macedonian authorities sent the riot police to the Greek border to push migrants back with truncheons and riot shields.[12] Repeatedly, the government blamed the Greek authorities for being incapable of dealing with the influx of people, and, as a response, started to erect wire fences along the Greek border in February 2016. Serbia, headed by the back-then Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučic,[13] at first adopted an open-door and open-borders policy *vis-à-vis* migrant populations, which later changed following the closure of the Western Balkans route. The Slovenian and Croatian governments, affected by the influx of migrants after the sealing of the Hungarian-Serbian frontier in September 2015, resorted mostly to conventional border enforcement measures. However, during the period of semi-official establishment of the Western Balkans corridor both countries provided free-of-charge transport to facilitate transit migration towards Central and Northern Europe.[14] Later, though, both countries set forth restrictions on the nationalities allowed to cross their frontiers. In February 2016, Slovenia introduced a daily cap for migrants admitted into the

country, before closing off its borders. Croatia, Serbia and Macedonia followed suit. Eventually, a series of meetings headed by the Austrian government sanctioned the closure of the Western Balkan corridor on 9 March 9 2016. After the shutdown, Slovenia and Croatia re-introduced the Schengen Border Code[15] and took back migrants at the borders.

The European migratory crisis represented a watershed also at the societal level, for it spurred a civil response both locally and transnationally. Contrary to the divisive behaviour of political leaders, a part of civil society responded to migrant arrivals with solidarity actions and humanitarian initiatives. To compensate for the poor responsiveness of their governments, a number of individuals mobilized to provide immediate relief to migrants in transit during their journey towards the EU. As in other parts of Europe,[16] the type of civic response varied over time and space, ranging from advocacy-oriented types of intervention, stop-gap self-organized initiatives, to small-scale demonstrative type of actions at the border crossings. Independently-run, volunteer-based organizations provided an immediate response to the increased arrivals. In several cases, solidarity groups reacted more immediately and at a faster pace than governments. Active at the border crossings and in the main cities the migrants crossed, volunteers and grassroots groups brought about an alternative system of humanitarian assistance. With the unfolding of the crisis, and the increasingly restrictive measures imposed by their governments, solidarity groups found themselves progressively prevented from providing assistance to migrants. Following the decision of governments to intervene and take over the tasks of assisting migrants, state-run registration camps underwent a process of securitization and professionalization. [17] As a consequence, informal solidarity groups found themselves precluded from accessing the transit camps hosting asylum seekers unless in the framework of large official organizations.

In a context that holds a weak record of grassroots activism, the emergence of a solidarity movement stands as a phenomenon that needs to be investigated further and under different angles. While, on the one hand, solidarity actors along the Western Balkans route mobilized at the local level, on the other they developed cross-national bonds with groups emerging with a similar purpose in other countries along the route. Interestingly, several individuals engaged in pro-refugee activism had not been previously involved in solidarity initiatives, and many had no prior record of political activism. By contrast, other groups were already active in the territory for some years.

Against this background, this article explores the conditions that favoured the emergence and unfolding of pro-refugee solidarity initiatives in two countries located at the outskirts of the EU, both holding a weak and recent record of grassroots activism. Specifically, I contend that a combination of two elements in particular increased the prospects for solidarity initiatives to thrive, compensating for the weak ties amongst activists and the limited financial and organizational resources, deemed in social movement studies necessary preconditions for collective action. First, the *emotional involvement of the local population* with refugees in transit, often grounded on a personal experience of displacement or uprooting. Second, the *narratives of government officials*, which framed the migratory movement through a discourse of transience and exceptionality, for which the EU had to be deemed responsible, while citizens were to be praised for their spontaneous, altruistic response. Essentially, with this study I wish to demonstrate that, in an emergency context, solidarity movements [18] can emerge and blossom notwithstanding limited financial and organizational

capacities, if there is an emotional involvement with the groups of individuals concerned and if discursive opportunities are favourable. To demonstrate that, I investigate the accounts of the migrant crisis given by movement actors in Serbia and Macedonia, two countries located at the outskirts of the EU, and heavily involved in the passage of migrants during the 2015-2016 migratory crisis. These accounts are aimed at reconstructing how solidarity actors motivated their engagement, and at explaining their decision to become involved in pro-refugee activism. To that end, I cast light on the discourses of government officials, in order to understand the extent to which the societal and political environment in which solidarity initiatives developed influenced its emergence and unfolding.

In what follows, I first outline the evolving scenario of the Western Balkans route and the semi-official establishment of the corridor, together with the grassroots response to the migrant flow in Macedonia and Serbia, the two countries on which the study focuses. Next, I explore in detail the two factors that I contend contributed to fostering altruistic mobilizations along the migratory path – emotional involvement and discursive opening. Finally, I draw some conclusion by summarizing the findings of the study.

Methodological note

The article relies on 15 in-depth qualitative interviews with key informants (activists, NGO practitioners and volunteers, and journalists) engaged in solidarity initiatives with migrants during the period lasting from spring 2015 to summer 2016,[19] and on participant observation in Belgrade during late July 2016.[20] Of these 15 interviews, seven were conducted in Macedonia and eight in Serbia. The solidarity actors interviewed differ from an organizational point of view, and have different political backgrounds. The configuration includes established actors such as formal organizations involved with migration-related activism from the years before the 2015-16 migrant crisis, which engaged also in lobbying campaigns towards their government to ask for changes in the country's asylum law (NGO Legis and Macedonian Young Lawyers organization in Macedonia; Adventist Development and Relief Agency ADRA in Serbia). Additionally, I interviewed members of social movement collectives, which engaged in actions of protest and awareness-raising on the topic of migration, besides providing relief to refugees in need (i.e. Solidarnost in Macedonia and No Borders group in Serbia); humanitarian organizations and local associations which emerged during the migrant crisis (Help the Refugees in Macedonia, Miksalište center and Info Park initiative in Serbia); and participated in also by foreign activists and volunteers. Nevertheless, the demarcation amongst these groups is rather blurred, as in practice a significant number of them were involved in different types of activities, ranging from protest-oriented to solidarity-oriented initiatives. The study also draws on the analysis of statements of policy-makers, as well as content analysis of media reporting in international news outlets.

The Western Balkans corridor and the grassroots response to the 2015-16 migrant crisis

When talking about the migratory trail through the Western Balkans region, a distinction is necessary between the *Western Balkans route*, an informal migratory path shaped over the years by movements of migrants striving to make their way across the borders of Europe, often with the help of human traffickers, and the *Western Balkans corridor*, which denotes a temporarily-legalized, state-sponsored passageway. Between 2015 and early 2016, the latter allowed migrants to move from the Turkish shore and the Greek islands through the Balkans to Northern Europe. The corridor permitted hundreds of thousands of migrants hailing mostly from Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, but also Pakistan, Eritrea, Somalia and Palestine, to pass across the previously closed borders of Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia and Austria, and to reach central Europe in a relatively safe manner.[21] However, during the period in which the corridor remained open – approximately from September 2015 to March 2016 – several states imposed nationality-based restrictions to entry in their territories. As of mid-November 2015, the passage through the corridor was denied to individuals not coming from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq (the so-called SIA countries). In February 2016, a ban was put on Afghans wanting to cross the borders. Following the shutdown of the corridor in March 2016, only those in possession of a valid visa were allowed to cross through the former Yugoslav states, as the re-introduction of the Schengen Border Code was announced, marking the temporary reinstatement of border controls at the internal borders of the EU as of 8 March.[22]

Macedonia, the entry point of the corridor

Since 2015, the village of Gevgelija, in the proximity of the Greek border in southern Macedonia, represented the corridor's entry point. During the period lasting from September to November 2015, the number of new arrivals at the Macedonian southern border amounted to above 150,000 persons per month, which means more than 5,000 new arrivals per day.[23] The figures dropped to around 1,500 new persons per day in early 2016.[24] In total, between June 2015 and March 2016, the number of people who entered the Macedonian territory declaring their intention to lodge an asylum claim in the EU amounted to almost 500,000.[25] The solidarity movement in the country sprung from a tragic event which occurred in April 2015, when a train struck 14 young migrants of Somali and Afghani origin who were walking along the railway tracks not far from the capital Skopje.[26] Irregular according to the country's asylum law, the migrants were forbidden by law to board public transport. Likely to be arrested and detained, they thus strove to reach the north of the country on foot, walking parallel to the train lines after sunset. The incident received high media coverage all over the country, to the extent that a significant number of interviewees reported it as marking an important turning point in raising public awareness on the refugee cause.[27] Following the incident, several individuals created a Facebook page called 'Help the refugees in Macedonia', which became a virtual platform to coordinate the provision and distribution of food, clothing and sanitary supplies to migrants on a daily basis.[28] Domestic NGOs mobilized in their support as well, reaching out to them in the streets, providing food supplies and offering legal support.[29] Following pressure from local and international NGOs, in June 2015 the national Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection was amended to allow migrants to use public transportation on the way to Serbia, at marked-up prices though.[30] In June 2015, the Macedonian parliament voted to give migrants a three-day visa that enabled them free movement across the country and the possibility to leave it within 72 hours from their arrival in case

they did not officially lodge an asylum claim. Allegedly unable to cope with the inflow of arrivals from Greece, in August 2015 the government declared a state of emergency on the southern and northern borders,[31] and deployed the army and security forces at the Greek border. On 18 November 2015, Macedonia introduced also a 'nationality screening program' imposing nationality-based restrictions, which limited entry to the country exclusively to SIA nationals.[32] Ten days later, local authorities ordered the erection of a wire fence along the Greek border in an attempt to stem the migration influx from the country, before eventually closing the entry point in Gevgelija in early March 2016.

Serbia, the bottleneck

Since May 2015, Serbia witnessed a rise in the number of migrants transiting across its territory. The flow soared in July 2015, as a consequence of the Hungarian government decision to close down its border with Serbia and to initiate constructing a fence along it (completed in mid-September 2015) to deter people from entering the country. Over summer 2015, thousands of migrants began to populate the parks[33] surrounding the train and bus stations of the capital, Belgrade, which became the main point where people on the move could find temporary refuge in tents. Local and foreign volunteers, organized in the 'Info Park' initiative, and operating from inside a former warehouse transformed into a collection/distribution centre and welcome point, named 'Miksalište', provided them daily with food, clothing, and information.[34] Other informal refugee centres emerged in the capital, especially after the local authorities prevented migrants from pitching their tents in the parks. With the support of the local and international No Border group activists, several migrants sought shelter in another warehouse in the vicinity of Miksalište, which they squatted and named 'No Border Hostel'.[35] Eventually, both Miksalište and the No Border Hostel were dismantled in April 2016, officially to make room for the contested 'Belgrade Waterfront Project', a project aimed at the refurbishment of the capital's Sava Mala neighbourhood.[36] Besides self-organized initiatives, in Serbia domestic and foreign NGOs got involved in providing humanitarian assistance in state-run transit camps all over the country, supporting local authorities also in facilitating the transit of migrants along the corridor. During the opening of the Balkan corridor, volunteers and NGO practitioners took care of migrants upon their arrival in Serbia in cooperation with officials of the country's Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, a public organization in charge of dealing with the 'care, return and integration of refugees'[37] – as it was the case of interviewees working or volunteering in the officially recognised transit centre of Preševo. As of late November 2015, access to the corridor was restricted only to SIA nationals. Consequently, those individuals unable to prove Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan citizenship attempted to enter Serbia with the help of human smugglers from across the Bulgarian frontier. Serbia thus converted into the transit point for migrants travelling across both Macedonian and Bulgarian paths. Due to the shutdown of the corridor in early March 2016, Belgrade again became the bottleneck of the migration route, being a crucial nexus for all those striving to reach the Schengen space through Hungary or Croatia. Facing no other option than remaining in Serbia, migrants populated the parks of Belgrade until late July 2016, when the municipality ploughed and fenced the green areas. Although the pace of migrant arrivals to the

Balkans had dropped since March 2016, hundreds of people continued to populate the area around the train and bus stations of the capital, finding shelter in occupied warehouses with no access to any facility, until they were evicted en masse in May 2017.[38]

Explaining the solidarity movement along the Western Balkans route: the emotional involvement

Following the cultural turn in the social sciences, which disclosed the prominent role that emotions play in political conflicts,[39] along with cognitive processes, organizational and structural factors, in this section I explore the emotional dynamics that informed the decision of individuals to engage in solidarity initiatives with migrants at the outskirts of the EU. I contend that the emotional involvement of activists and volunteers with the refugees compensated at least in part for the absence of networks and previous experience of volunteerism of individuals engaged in pro-refugee activism. As the following excerpts from my interviews disclose, a significant number of interviewees motivated their decision to engage in solidarity initiatives as grounded on humanity, outrage, and compassion, which Jasper defined as 'moral emotions'.[40] According to Jasper, moral emotions consist of 'feelings of approval and disapproval based on moral intuitions and principles, as well as the satisfactions we feel when we do the right (or wrong) thing, but also when we feel the right (or wrong) thing, such as compassion for the unfortunate or indignation over injustice'.[41] As Goodwin and other scholars have noted, moral emotions intertwine with cultural meanings and cognitive understandings, which shape our knowledge of 'what is right or wrong, good or bad'.[42] Far from being irrational, emotions are said to be 'created and reinforced in narrative and discourses'[43] and therefore 'firmly rooted in moral and cognitive beliefs that are relatively stable and predictable'.[44] In line with the emphasis the cultural turn puts on the importance of emotions, my analysis stresses that a strong emotional commitment drove activists and volunteers' behaviour, inclining them to intervene in support of migrants. In turn, biographical experiences of displacement and uprooting proved important prerequisites for pro-refugee engagement, as they constituted preconditions for moral emotions to develop. In that regard, an interviewee living in Macedonia motivated her engagement as grounded on compassion and humanity, and her decision to get involved in the solidarity movement as triggered by an episode that, disrupting her daily routine, urged her into action. In her interview, she recounts:

> Suddenly, I found myself driving at night on the road from Skopje to Stip, when I saw them [the migrants] on the road. People were walking with children near me and I was shocked to see little children walking. When you witness such a scene it totally changes you. You cannot just keep going with the car. I stopped and asked them what they needed (…) and this is how the organization started.[45]

For other activists, the motivation to engage in the solidarity movement got reinforced during the action, thanks to the establishment of affective and emotional bonds developed by contact with migrants. The following excerpt of an interview with a lawyer working for the MYLA association in

Skopje, a national organization active for about a decade in mobilization for refugees' rights – and in particular for Kosovars and Roma citizens, reports:

> I was working both in the office and in the camps since June. It has been very challenging to see so many people and to hear so many stories of war and traumatic experiences. What personally motivated me are the will, the motivation and the positivity the refugees had. They had been through so much and stay positive sometimes, and speak about such horrendous events. This motivated me to keep doing what I am doing. People are fleeing from horrendous situations and trying to have a bit of safety for themselves.[46]

Compassion, empathy and humanity likewise informed the personal decision to get involved in solidarity actions of a young psychologist who worked in the state registration camp of Preševo, in southern Serbia. She describes her commitment as emotionally grounded, but at the same time also emotionally charged:

> When somebody tells you about his life you understand him. You become close to him, and everything happening to him affects you. Now I see it as more personal that I should. Anything that happens now in Afghanistan and Pakistan affects me more than before. I got close to them [the migrants] and this had a lot of impact. Hearing that people die is not easy and it is always so distant, until you meet their culture. (…) I have different feelings: anger towards the EU and other organizations; sometimes I felt helpless and hopeless, we [practitioners and volunteers] had debriefing with psychologists in order to remain sane.[47]

Often, the emotional commitment stemmed from a process of identification of the individuals involved in solidarity actions with the group of migrants in transit, originating from the perception of having undergone a similar experience of displacement and/or uprooting in the past. In several cases, feelings of empathy and compassion originated from personal life experiences, which constituted another element partly accounting for altruistic commitment. As a matter of fact, a significant number of activists interviewed underwent forced displacement during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, and mentioned it as a factor motivating their engagement. An activist in Macedonia connected her decision to get involved in the solidarity movement with her personal experience of displacement in the recent past. As she points out, several people living in the region share this condition, as, she claims, they still remember clearly what it means to seek refuge from a war:

> I am a Bosniak, we had a refugee crisis… I felt how war affects people. Also the Albanians [living in Macedonia] remember the refugee crisis in Kosovo, and the refugees used the same path the Macedonians used during the Great War when the Greeks expelled them.[48]

While, on the one hand, a personal background of displacement inclined individuals to take action, on the other also a biographical experience of living abroad informed the decision to get involved in collective solidarity actions in support of refugees. The following interviewee referred to her story of uprooting as a predictor of her commitment:

> I travelled a lot all my life, and lived in different countries for 11 years, so I know what it means to be displaced. When I saw the refugees crossing our country it was certainly my life experience that brought me to help them.[49]

Another NGO practitioner from Serbia portrayed her commitment as a moral duty in light of her personal biography, as her words highlight:

> As a foreigner, I was not forced to go outside my country (…) I decided to explore everything and I thought this was an occasion to discover people more. (…) I think the involvement of foreigners motivated the Serbs to get involved. For instance, in Miksalište some volunteers were young people doing the Balkan tour, who saw the refugees and ended up there. [50]

While appealing mostly to humanitarian principles as drivers of their commitment, the empirical analysis reveals that emotions had a prominent role, and often lay at the heart of the decision to get engaged in solidarity actions with migrants. Hence, a similar emotional involvement drove into action and brought together individuals who at times were new to this kind of experience. The solidarity movement in both Serbia and Macedonia tapped into emotional resources to compensate for the lack, or weakness, of pre-existing solidarity networks and social ties, and the sparse organizational and financial capacities available to the movement. In this respect, emotional resources allowed the solidarity movement to prosper, compensating in part for the limited financial and organizational capacities of the movement.

The framing of the crisis: a discursive opening

The second factor that partially accounts for the flourishing of a refugee solidarity movement along the Western Balkans route concerns the discursive strategies employed by institutional actors during the period in which the Western Balkans corridor remained open. The collective narrative that officials put forward created a fertile ground for the movement to develop, increasing the prospects for altruistic mobilizations. To that end, I explore the context in which the solidarity movement emerged and unfolded. In fact, social movements scholarship has resorted to the role that external factors play in the movements themselves to explain the occurrence of collective action, putting forward the concept of 'opportunities'.[51] Specifically, some scholars have explored the extent to which the economic and political context in which collective action occurs influences mobilization, creating opportunities for action.[52] Other scholars have expanded the rubric of 'opportunities' to the cultural sector, elaborating the notion of 'discursive opportunities'.[53] Essentially, this concept takes into account the cultural dynamics in which mobilization occurs, and the way in which a certain issue is framed within a certain polity at a specific time.[54] With this notion, scholars have aimed at exploring the cultural elements that, in a broader environment, facilitate and/constrain successful social movement framing. By drawing on the concept of 'discursive opportunity structure', I thus analyse the ways in which government officials framed the refugee crisis during the 2015 long summer of migration, and the extent to which this created favourable prospects for solidarity actors.

Throughout summer 2015, therefore at the beginning of the 'crisis', state officials in Serbia and Macedonia referred to the growth in migration flow as a transient and exceptional phenomenon, in a similar fashion to Western European leaders.[55] In so doing, they enhanced and promoted an understanding of the migratory movement along the Western Balkans route mostly as a temporary and out-of-the-ordinary event. In their public discourses, domestic state authorities often underlined that the migrants did not constitute a severe threat to the local population, as they were not intending to settle in their territories. Hence, these narratives contributed to reinforce the perception of the Western Balkans as representing only a provisional stage along the route towards other EU countries, more attractive for migrants that the non-EU and economically poor former Yugoslav states. In that regard, Macedonia's president Gjorge Ivanov, of the conservative-nationalist party VMRO-DPMNE, claimed publicly:

> The refugees are waiting for Merkel to pick them up in planes or trains. They all want to go to Germany and do not want to stay in Greece.[56]

In a similar fashion, the then Serbian premier Aleksandar Vučić (Serbian Progressive Party, SNS) held progressive public discourses about migrants, pointing to the exceptionality of the situation and emphasizing the country's willingness to provide medical assistance and other types of support necessary 'for the few days the migrants usually spend in Serbia'.[57] Similarly, the Serbian prime minister often openly praised the humanitarian governmental commitment towards migrants, supported on the ground by the well-disposed behaviour of the Serbian police patrol, which showed tolerance toward the presence of refugees in the parks of Belgrade throughout the summer. The picture of a Serbian policeman, later disclosed to have Albanian origins, cuddling a Syrian kid[58] became viral throughout social networks on fall 2015, contributing to strengthen the image of tolerant domestic police forces in the media.[59] Besides claiming publicly the welcoming stance of Serbia towards migrants and refugees, in August 2015 the premier visited personally the parks of Belgrade, where migrants had found temporary respite. To reinforce Serbia's welcoming stance, the PM resorted to his refugee background, and to the country's welcoming policies towards IDPs in the aftermath of the 1990s Yugoslav wars.[60] On another occasion, he stressed the intention to leave the country's borders open by refusing to compare asylum seekers with terrorists, saying:

> We speak about desperate people, we don't speak about criminals and terrorists. They are just on their way to find better lives for themselves and their kids: they need help, they don't need condemnation and punishment. You cannot stop the flow of life with fences.[61]

In line with their narratives revolving around migration as a temporary and exceptional phenomenon, national governments of both Serbia and Macedonia favoured migrant transit with concrete policies. Both countries provided specially commissioned trains to facilitate the passage towards other destinations in the EU, or towards the next country's border. Furthermore, in 2015 the Serbian and Macedonian governments provided people on the move with 'semi-regular legal statuses',[62] introducing the so-called 'white cards', documents allowing migrants to legally cross the

former Yugoslav countries within a 72-hour time frame. Moreover, both governments publicly declared to have no possibility of hosting a high number of potential asylum seekers in their territories, as the temporary hosting facilities in Macedonia were not suited to accommodate people for extended stay, having a capacity of only 2,000 people.[63] In a similar fashion, in Serbia the centres aimed at hosting asylum seekers near Belgrade still had to be emptied of the IDPs who had been living there since the end of the 1990s war. The official statistics seemed to mirror the transitory nature of the passage through the Western Balkan countries, as the numbers of individuals lodging an asylum application in Serbia or Macedonia in 2015 and 2016 were insignificant compared with Austria, a destination country at the end of the route. As at 31 December 2015, 57,795 refugees and migrants expressed their intention to seek asylum in Serbia,[64] while more than 40,000 submitted an asylum application in Macedonia.[65] These data might seem misleading thought, as both former Yugoslav countries required migrants to register their intention to seek asylum in the country in order to cross their territories. However, the majority of them abandoned the country before effectively lodging a claim. For instance, data show that, in 2015, only 30 positive decisions were taken in response to the 57,795 asylum applications submitted in Serbia, and 3 in Macedonia, out of 43,590 asylum claims received in the same year.[66] By contrast, in Austria, during the same period, the number of people claiming international protection amounted to 88,160, of whom 21,045 received a positive answer.[67]

Such a 'temporary humanitarian approach'[68] of the former Yugoslav states towards refugees provided a fertile ground for humanitarian grassroots initiatives to prosper, favouring the emergence of groups providing first-hand help to the migrants, at times in cooperation with local authorities. In several instances, it emerged that the discourses of solidarity actors aligned with the interpretation of the domestic authorities, portraying the migratory movement along the Western Balkans route as a transient phenomenon. In that regard, one interviewee associated the tolerance and welcoming stance of locals towards asylum seekers owing to the alleged temporality of the migratory phenomenon, by saying: 'People were tolerant as they [migrants] did not want to stay there'.[69] In a similar fashion, another interviewee claimed that: 'Serbia sees itself as a transit country (…) People are nice because they know migrants would leave the country'.[70] The fact that the majority of solidarity actors framed themselves as fulfilling a humanitarian-oriented rather than political-oriented type of action, owing also to their inability to elaborate a political strategy due to the emergency situation they were facing, contributed to the perception of solidarity initiatives as not representing a threat to local authorities, at least in the period preceding the corridor's shutdown. This attitude, in turn, facilitated the collaboration with state authorities, which relied on solidarity actors to handle the influx of refugees – or, better, their transit to the next country – especially in the first stage of the refugee crisis.

In spite of taking slightly different approaches to the refugee crisis, Serbia and Macedonia both depicted themselves as protecting the EU's borders, notwithstanding them not being EU member states and claiming not to receive enough financial support from the EU. Another discursive strategy adopted in 2015 by institutional actors in the two former Yugoslav states consisted in portraying the countries as fulfilling the mission of acting as bulwarks against the security threat migrants were allegedly posing to Europe. In that regards, the President of Macedonia Ivanov stated publicly that:

> The crisis is coming from the territory of Greece – a Schengen area state. So Macedonia has to defend Europe from the EU itself.[71]

Government officials in both countries described their states as victims of the EU system, paying for the incapability of the EU to cope with migrant arrivals, while receiving little in return. Although representing migrants mostly as an issue of security concern (as was the case of Macedonian officials), the narrative in both countries focused on the attribution of blame to the EU, incapable of coping with the rising number of refugees. Conversely, both countries' government officials praised the humanitarian response of local authorities and the altruistic behaviour of their citizens. Repeatedly, Macedonian President Gjorge Ivanov blamed the EU for not providing enough financial resources for the country to handle the arrivals, whereas giving substantial financial help to Greece, a EU country proving, in his view, unfit to put a halt to migrant arrivals towards the neighbour country. In one occasion, he said:

> As a transit-only country, Macedonia is doing this for the benefit of the EU. Unfortunately, even as we are trying to implement EU decisions, we face unfair criticism for doing so.[72]

In other speeches, President Ivanov stressed the 'sacrifice' of Macedonia, 'paying for the mistakes of the EU'.[73] He also pointed at Greece as the true culprit for the transit of refugees, and praised the humanitarian stance of its citizens, although stating clearly that Macedonia would not pay for the EU's mistakes. In that regard, he said:

> We are also showing a humane face. The Macedonians have provided an incredible amount of help. They have provided medical care and made donations. But once again: We are not a EU country and have to pay for the EU's mistakes.[74]

Similarly, the Serbian prime minister prided himself on a compassionate and humane treatment of refugees crossing the Serbian territory, asserting to be 'satisfied and proud' of the humanitarian behaviour of ordinary citizens.[75] The Serbian welcome policy is best understood in relation to the country's prospect of EU accession.[76] In Serbia, the initial pro-refugee stance of the government was coupled with a commitment to comply with EU standards, in order to accelerate Serbia's path towards the EU membership. In an attempt to demonstrate goodwill and commitment to European values, premier Vučić pointed out the commitment of the country in supporting refugees by claiming that the country was 'more European that the Europeans themselves'.[77] In so saying, the Prime Minister wished to improve the country's image internationally,[78] underlining its willingness and commitment to follow EU rules, notwithstanding the financial constraints derived from not being yet part of the EU, in an attempt to increase its leverage towards the EU. Essentially, the narrative coupling the blame towards the EU and certain EU countries, pointed out as responsible for the mismanagement of migrant arrivals, with the praise for local citizens and state authorities in handling the humanitarian crisis during summer 2015, as well as the alignment of the solidarity actors' discourse with the authorities' narratives, provided a favourable context for a solidarity movement and its self-organized relief efforts to flourish.

Conclusion

The opening of the Western Balkans corridor represented the first time after the end of the 1990s' wars that the former Yugoslav states found themselves handling a massive arrival of people, which seemingly caught policy-makers unprepared to handle it. By contrast, the migrant flow did not catch by surprise the volunteers activists and grassroots solidarity groups. Notwithstanding the chaotic and rapidly changing situation at the border crossings, solidarity actors provided timely humanitarian assistance to support transit migrants, at times filling a void created by the absence of an appropriate response by state authorities. Not only did pre-existing groups mobilize, while already-extant ones shifted their focus to meet the refugees' immediate needs, but new ones also emerged and spread, while new alliances and collaborative networks developed at both the national and transnational level.

Essentially, this article has shed light on two factors in particular, which accounted for the emergence of local solidarity initiatives in support of migrants crossing the Western Balkans route in summer 2015. First, the study revealed that emotional resources played an important role, as moral and emotional questions informed the decision of individuals to get involved in migration-related political activism, while biographical experiences of displacement or uprooting represented a predictor of solidarity actors' commitment. Secondly, it showed that the evolution of solidarity movements was strongly shaped by discursive opportunities, particularly at the beginning of the refugee crisis. At first, in fact, governments in Macedonia and Serbia portrayed the inflow of migrants as a temporary rather than a long-term phenomenon, owing, in their opinion, to the peculiar position that the Yugoslav successor states occupy in the geography of migration, and for their being less attractive for migrants *vis-à-vis* EU countries. Thus, local governments framed the passage of migrants by adopting a logic of exceptionality and temporality, which contributed to create a feeling of empathy towards migrants, as they favoured the perception of migrants as not posing a severe threat to the local population, for they did not intend to settle in the former Yugoslav countries. The humanitarian approach of local authorities, accompanied by policies favouring the transit rather than the reception of asylum seekers, increased the prospects for altruistic mobilizations in both countries at the gate of the EU.

The scenery changed dramatically with the progressive closing of borders and the shutdown of the corridor following the EU-Turkish agreement in March 2016. As a consequence, the flow of refugees lost intensity progressively throughout the first months of 2016, and the number of arrivals in the Western Balkans fell sharply. The situation became particularly tense in Belgrade, where hundreds of refugees got stuck, unable to continue their path forward, owing to their incapability to cross both the Croatian and the Hungarian borders. The narrative twisted accordingly. Humanitarianism faded from public discourses, and the activities of NGOs and solidarity groups began to be further obstructed with different means. After the shutdown of the corridor, both governments hampered the self-organized provision of assistance to stranded migrants. In Belgrade, local solidarity groups were prevented from distributing meals to the migrants in the parks in November 2016. The situation worsened to the extent that one interviewee claimed: 'last year [2015] they had tents and toilets, now they have nothing'.[79] On 9 March 2016, Macedonia closed its border

with Greece, while the Serbian prime minister repeated on many occasions that 'Serbia won't serve as a parking lot for refugees that the EU does not accept'.[80] The attitude towards migrants deteriorated also in the media. Notwithstanding the changed scenario and the progressive securitization of the borders, grassroots solidarity initiatives continued along the Western Balkans route with different means even after the official shutdown of the corridor.

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5   While mass-media reports usually adopted the term 'refugees' to refer both to asylum seekers and migrants, I acknowledge that the terms 'refugee' and 'asylum seeker' have different meanings. For the sake of brevity, throughout the article I use the expression 'migrant', 'refugee', 'asylum seeker', and 'people on the move' interchangeably to refer to individuals who have fled their countries in a bid to escape war, or a result of economic deprivation, regardless of having lodged an asylum claim or having been granted international protection under the 1951 Refugee Convention on the Status of Refugees UNHCR, 'Text of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees,' 1951, http://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10.

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