







## **Weekly Briefing**

**Bosnia-Herzegovina Political briefing:**  
**New migrant crisis and impact on Bosnian politics**  
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## **New migrant crisis and impact on Bosnian politics**

### **New wave of migrants**

From early 2018, Bosnian security agencies started to register significant increase of migrants passing through Bosnia and Herzegovina. Published data recorded 50% increase of migrants in the first three months of 2018 and 70% more asylum-seeking applications. Official statistic published in June 2018 shows that BIH had 4226 registered migrants on its territory, three or four times as much as Montenegro or Albania, both on the new migrant route to the Western Europe.

According to BIH Federal Police and Ministry of Security, the situation was held under control until July, after which the number of migrants rapidly increased. Montenegro, a country through which most of migrants arrived to Bosnia and Herzegovina, just like other countries along a new migrant route that goes along Ionian and Adriatic coast carries so called “laissez passer” policy, letting or facilitating migrants to pass through without detaining or reporting the migrants. In the same manner, authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina “closed one eye” on the increasing number of migrants. After entering the country, migrants would quickly pass through the country and head towards border towns in Una-Sana canton, Bosnian westernmost region bordering Croatia. From here, they had only few kilometers to Croatian border and, more importantly, less than 100 km to Schengen Slovenia.

In summer months media reported large number of migrants arriving in town of Bihac, Velika Kladusa and Cazin, situated only few kilometers away from the Croatian border. With increasing number of migrants, the incidents with the local population have also become more frequent. The situation escalated by October, after Croatian border police tightened the control of border crossings and left migrants stranded in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Number of migrants that crowded bus stations, town squares, improvised shelters in

Bihac and surrounding areas led to serious crisis when local population blocked the access to town and started demonstrations against government's inability to provide temporary solution for migrants.

In mid-October, Bosnian special police forces sealed off Maljevac crossing point, stopping a group of migrants just meters away from the border. More than two hundred people mostly from Pakistan and Afghanistan, one third consisting of children and women, demanded to be allowed to leave Bosnia and Herzegovina and refused to be taken in nearby detention facilities. For security reason the crossing point was closed for all traffic, causing losses to local businesses and straining the economy of this Bosnian northwesternmost region. Local population interviewed by major Croatian daily Vecernji list, claim that the border blockade stopped all outbound shipments to the rest of Europe. Entrepreneurs and business owners threatened to organize more large protests since shopping tourists from Croatia and Slovenia stopped coming to local supermarkets, gas stations and restaurants. At the same time, the crime rate increased. According to local media, street violence and petty crime became very visible in Bihac and Velika Kladusa, while some reports claim more serious offences among the migrants, including rape, murder and drug smuggling. Under pressure from the EU and the local population, Bosnian authorities negotiated a deal with migrants, who agreed to be accommodated in improvised shelters in Velika Kladusa and Bihac, after which, the crossing point was reopened.

This solution, hardly satisfying both the local population and migrants, was said to be a temporarily solution until the EU approves more funds for migrants. Meanwhile, despite bottlenecks on Croatian border, this region continues to receive most of migrants that cross into Bosnia and Herzegovina. Investigative journalists warn the situation in the region is getting worse and is on the verge to turn into serious security crisis. Local and central government, on the other hand, claim that the situation is normalized and there are only isolated incidents involving crime and violence.

To put in a bigger picture, the expectation of the EU providing permanent solution and relieving the region from the pressure of unsustainable inflow of migrants is still holding the situation “generally peaceful”; however, permanent political crisis this country experiences over the years threaten to turn medium-level humanitarian crisis into security issue. Instead of extensive analysis of consequences the current migrant crisis has on Bosnian society, this report will focus on the impact it had on political level and reveal some of “typical” problems Bosnia and Herzegovina encounters in tackling crisis situation.

### **Uncooperative local sheriffs and ignorant central bureaucrats**

After the whole Una-Sana canton was overcrowded with migrants, local and federal government started with mutual accusations and passing responsibility to other instances. Federal government blamed lack of funding, slow reaction from the EU and uncoordinated action by neighboring countries for bottlenecks in migrant flow occurring in Bosnia and Herzegovina. With the first incidents and protests arriving from Bihac, the federal government appealed the local population to show patience and humanity towards migrants, but at the same time didn't do much to reroute migrant flow to other destinations. As a matter of fact, some politicians from Sarajevo criticized the conditions in which the migrants were allowed to stay, ignoring the fact that local government cannot do much to help them without central funding.

Sealing the border checkpoint only aggravated absurdity of the situation, forcing the government to find a quick solution to accommodate stranded migrants while struggling to maintain and coordinate humanitarian activities with the local government. In parallel, during the protests organized by local population (which, according to some sources were dubbed as “anti-migrant”), mayors of Bihac and Velika Kladusa have more openly voiced grievances with the impending crisis, calling federal government to undertake more than palliative measures in tackling the crisis. Fikret Abdic, controversial mayor of Velika Kladusa refused to bear any personal responsibility for accommodating

migrants and blamed the government for not being able to communicate with the EU countries that any sort of permanent settlement is not acceptable. Suhret Fazlic, his colleague in Bihac, joined protesters demanding more tight control of Bosnian border and responsiveness from Sarajevo in providing temp shelters. By October, after more than 5000 migrants arrived in this town of 50, 000 people, his statements atoned in damage control calling the local population to put humanitarian reasons before security issues. Only after Maljevac crossing point was reopened, Bosnian Security Minister Dragan Mektic promised to put the excess of migrants in detention camp near Sarajevo. This idea lingered in the words of federal politicians from the beginning of the year, but “everyone expected Bosnia and Herzegovina will get away” by continuing with laissez passer policy. Croatian police merely enforcing their task in border protection caught Bosnian authorities unprepared to seriously tackle migrant issue. Neither the federal government or local authorities could have hoped that the buck will stop at their doorstep.

### **Inter-entity and inter-ethnic issues**

In July 2018, BIH Federal Police announced a plan to enforce more tight control over the country`s border found a big reaction in the Republic of Srpska (ROS). Milorad Dodik, the President of ROS, threatened to use force if the Federal Police oversteps inter-entity boundary. He called every unilateral action by the Federation unacceptable and made clear that only coordinated action of the Federal Police and ROS Police can be enforced on external borders of ROS. According to ROS government, migrant crisis is a problem that the central government has to negotiate with the European partners, hence, it rejects the responsibility for accepting or detaining the migrants. ROS Police Dept Director, Darko Culum said that ROS has no available facilities to accommodate migrants, while President Dodik more directly told to press that ROS “will not allow migrants to be detained on territory of Srpska”. Federal politicians, on the other hand, accuse ROS for not doing enough in stopping the migrants from crossing

into Bosnia and Herzegovina illegally. Border posts through which migrants enter into BIH are external borders of ROS overlapping with borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosnian Security Minister Mektic also accused ROS police not registering migrants, but “illegally smuggling them into the Federation”. Lastly, migrant crisis was used as “a good political polygon” for rightist politicians to earn or consolidate vote support before the elections. The fact that migrants are coming from Muslim countries was used to spin inter-ethnic tensions. Rumors are spread that the migrants are purposefully sent to “change the ethnic structure of the ROS” or even to slowly overtake this entity from the Serbs.

Media outlets have reported that some of the political parties benefited from instrumentalizing migrant crisis in political campaigning by bandwagoning nationalist and xenophobic voices from other European countries. However, in Bosnia and Herzegovina this anti-migrant sentiment had additional trait in stirring up anti-Sarajevo and anti-centralist policies. Inability of the central government in tackling migrant crisis was welcomed by ethno-political parties. HDZ BIH voiced concerns with “humanitarian dimension” of the problem; concurrent with ROS government, SNSD emphasized lack of coordinated action by central, inter-entity and regional bodies; lastly, SDA blamed regional leaders and other ethnic parties for hypocritical approach and shirking of responsibility.

Overall, Bosnia and Herzegovina survived its first migrant crisis despite political conflicts, incoordination and irresponsiveness. Although it is hard to make final assessment on social mobilization of local population in Una-Sana region, it is safe to say that humanitarian concerns didn't fall victim to security concerns. Just as Mayor of Bihac said, assistance and donations provided by local population was rarely mentioned in the news that followed migrants, but it was the main reason why the crisis didn't escalate into street violence. Small stories on the help given by volunteers, humanitarian workers and concerned citizens flocked together with the stories on violent encounters with the migrants.

People learned to balance between the feeling of aversity towards intruders overstaying their welcome and identification with them, as the most of the locals were refugees themselves 20 years ago. At the end, it is not the first time they are left without the help of government to take things in their own hands.