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THE BALKAN ROUTE AND THE CHALLENGES OF THE PANDEMIC

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I am Father Stanko Perica, a Croatian Jesuit, director of the Jesuit Refugee Service in Southeast Europe, that is in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia and Kosovo. JRS celebrated 40 years of existence last year, and we're present at the moment in 56 countries around the world.

In this region of South-East Europe, we're talking about the countries on the Balkan migratory route, where thousands of people have been passing through in last few years, trying to find a better life in the European Union. This route was in the centre of media attention in 2015 and 2016 when hundreds of thousands of refugees were moving towards northern and western Europe.

The numbers have fallen from March 2016, when EU reached a migration agreement with Turkey, aiming at discouraging refugees to enter EU. Still, a certain number continued to come, but now through a changed route that passes not any more from Serbia to Hungary, since Hungary built a border barrier on its border with Serbia and Croatia, but from Serbia to Bosnia, and then to Croatia and other EU countries. So, this has created the circumstances in which all the countries of the Balkan route became the transit countries, with the borders that are relatively easy to pass, until one comes to Bosnian-Croatian border which is well guarded and protected. Consequently, it's already four years now that Bosnia is a migrant hot-spot. There are approximately 8.000 people in Bosnia, 3.000 in two camps in Sarajevo, 5.000 in Bihać, out of whom 2.000 are outside the camps, that is in the forest, under some tent, or squatting some abandoned building, and waiting for appropriate weather conditions to try the so called "game", that is to attempt to pass the border. JRS has an office in Bihać, from where I just came to Zagreb, Croatia. Bihać and its surroundings, an area right in front of the EU border, becomes a symbol of suffering and helplessness, as it hosts so many people who would like to leave that place but are stuck there, and live unhuman conditions. And it's difficult to see the end of this situation since other 8.000 migrants are in Serbia, also waiting for the spring time to enter Bosnia and then to continue towards Croatia.

This reality has not been touched by Covid as much as so-called normal society. The limits that Covid imposed are for this population simply something too luxurious to bother with. Migrants in the camps are wearing masks when it's imposed, and those outside the camps never. There was no case of death related to Covid among the migrant population in this region. Grand majority of them are young, and only the healthy ones set out on such a long journey, so they are not among the population at higher risk. But those who are trying to help them have been restricted in many aspects. First, we have a great difficulty to get volunteers from other countries, and our work was organised in a way that counted on their support. For example, in Serbia we run an integration centre

for unaccompanied minors, The Pedro Arrupe House that was relying on volunteers, especially during the summer period. Also, our functioning in non-EU countries depends on private donations, that have been reduced during this period. In EU countries, on the other hand, the Covid-related regulations are much stricter, often even irrationally strict, so for example in Croatia we and other organisations are unable to enter into reception or detention centres for over a year now, regardless of the measures we are ready to follow. That fact decreases significantly the life quality of refugees and migrants, since if the psycho-social help was ever needed it's during the time of Covid. Another issue is increased marginalisation of migrants, since the local people have another reason to be afraid of them or simply to avoid them, as the potential virus carriers. We had unpleasant experience in Bosnia few weeks ago, when two of our employees, who were in a supermarket wearing JRS jackets, were attacked first verbally and then physically by a local man, angered by the fact that we are helping migrants.

Nevertheless, in these circumstances we're continuing our work adapting to new challenges. JRS has in its fundamentals three key-words: accompany, serve and advocate. And we're adapting these guidelines to the circumstances in each country. When it is, due to Covid, more difficult to find opportunities to accompany and serve, we use time to develop our advocating aspect. We're very grateful to the Church media that are following our work, and informing the public about the realities we are dealing with. It is so important to influence the public opinion, since in this time in whole this region we're more than ever facing legal and bureaucratic obstacles, since in the time of Covid refugees have become a secondary topic. In Croatia, since we're unable to reach asylum seekers and do the early integration, as we did before Covid, we're working on creating humanitarian corridors that would enable at least some of the refugees to come legally in this country. It is a pioneering work in Croatia, and even though the Ministry of Interior is publicly advocating alternative pathways as opposed to illegal migrations, they're not willing to grant asylum to the people who would come through humanitarian corridors. We also want to work on integration of foreign workers in Croatia, number of whom is always growing, especially in the field of tourism and construction. Again, the obstacle is state inertness, which is allowing some employees to create a system similar to infamous kafala system in Middle East countries. Without a state-imposed integration policy, we observe the creation easy opportunities for the exploitation of workers. Our international aspect helps us to communicate experiences and good practices to other countries. For example, Kosovo, a new country, still not recognised but many, is now in the process of creating an integration policy. Up to 2020 only Turkish citizens were granted asylum, but now they're opening also to other nationalities and JRS is participating in that process, trying to help with the resources and experience.

The most challenging situation is nevertheless the one in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We're present there since 2018, when a migrant crisis began, and we have carried out the activity of translation and accompaniment in the provision of healthcare. We're present in Sarajevo, the capital city, which has two camps in its surroundings, and Bihać, near the EU border, with its four migrant camps. Over the years our activities in the camps have expanded, and so we used to organize sports activities, such as cricket and volleyball tournaments, we celebrated important dates with migrants, such as International Women's Day, World Children's Day, Mother Language Day, World Refugee Day, we celebrate Christian and Muslim holidays together. One of our employees likes to do magic shows to entertain migrants. In addition, we have a project to train migrants in the camps, so we offer the course of the Bosnian language, English language, course of the culture and customs of the European Union, and a course in IT. For those among them that are Catholics, we offer confession and spiritual conversations, and when it's possible, on the solemnities, we try to take them to the church in the town. Unfortunately,

the number of migrants in this region of Bosnia and Herzegovina is always growing, and the state has great difficulty in handling this situation. In 2019, the infamous Vučjak camp opened, a former landfill a few kilometres from the Croatian border, without water and electricity. In 2020, after the fire that destroyed the new Lipa refugee camp, several hundred migrants were left without accommodation, and now that number is around two thousand. So we started providing assistance to them too by doing outreach, distributing food, water, clothes, shoes, medicines, supplements to strengthen their immunity, that is everything what they need and what we can get thanks to our donors. We charge their cell phones, distribute power banks, solar panels to give them at least some electricity and light at night. We have our own cultural mediators, eighteen of them, who speak the mother languages of the migrants, so we understand them, we always know what are their current needs, and we try to bring back some of their dignity. We also have our medical volunteers, one of them is our Jesuit seminarian. The migrants who are outside the camps, in many places around Bihać, are unable to take a shower or wash their clothes, so they cannot prevent skin infections, especially scabies, and unfortunately we often also face physical injuries, following border incidents. We also do translations for state institutions, especially police and tribunals, in cases when a migrant is a witness or an accused party, as the Bosnian state does not have translators for the Pashto and Urdu languages. So, simply said, we are close to them, we want to be their neighbours, not strangers. We want to show the hospitable face of Europe.

The call of pope Francis, to be All Brothers, is really lived here. This misfortune is bringing us, Christians and Muslims, closer together. Here we pray together, we celebrate together the feasts of each other, we really don't feel endangered. There's one interesting rule that we observe in Bosnia daily: those people who are close to migrants, who are getting to know them, who are helping them, they aren't afraid of them. Those who are running away from them, those who can't stand them, they claim to know the migrants' real intentions and are afraid of them. By opening to the stranger your fear vanishes. For me it's the confirmation of the parable of the Good Samaritan – only the one who engages, becomes a neighbour. Thank you very much for this occasion to share these experiences with you.