

## 6. Camp geographies in Una-Sana Canton, Bosnia and Herzegovina (2018–2022)

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### INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on how the interplay between the opening and closing of formal camps for migrants and the dissolution of the existing archipelago of makeshift camps in Una-Sana Canton, Bosnia and Herzegovina, impacted the camp geographies of this border region between 2018 and 2022. As noted by Minca and Umek (2020), Bosnia and Herzegovina received very few ‘irregularized’ migrants during the humanitarian emergency of 2015 and 2016, during which nearly a million people moved through the Balkan region towards Western Europe. However, from the end of 2017, the country began to experience a substantial increase in arrivals, leading to a humanitarian crisis, particularly in the northwestern Una-Sana Canton, where a significant number of refugees gathered within a few months, waiting for the opportunity to cross the Croatian border and enter the European Union (EU) (Ibid.).

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Bosnian Ministry for Security recorded that ‘24,067 migrants and refugees’ entered Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2018 (n.d.). These people-on-the-move began arriving in Tuzla and Sarajevo first, followed by the cities of Bihać and Velika Kladuša in Una-Sana Canton. Initially, they stayed in parks or abandoned buildings in city centres and received informal assistance from local residents, who provided food and other forms of support, especially to families with children (see Helms, 2023; Hromadžić, 2019). Soon after, the northern border of Bosnia and Herzegovina was recognized by international humanitarian organizations as integral to a new major branch of the Balkan Route, with Una-Sana Canton becoming a leading transit point for people-on-the-move preparing to attempt the so-called ‘Game’ – a term used by migrants to

characterize ‘informal attempts to cross the EU border by walking through forests, crossing rivers, climbing border fences, jumping on trains, hiding in trucks, or procuring taxi services through smugglers’ (Minca & Collins, 2021: 2; see also Chapter 1, this volume).

Thus, academic research on the role of the Una-Sana Canton in the Balkan Route has examined the ways in which ‘the Game’ shapes refugee and migrant geographies and experiences (Minca & Collins, 2021; see also Augustová et al., 2023b; Zocchi, 2024), the related emergence of a network of makeshift camps (Jordan & Minca, 2023a; Minca & Umek, 2020), and the systematic pushbacks perpetrated by the Croatian border police, including the racialized violence that has characterized what many describe as the ‘EU border regime’ (Augustová, 2021, 2023a; Davies et al., 2023; Isakjee et al., 2020; Zocchi, 2023). The literature has also discussed the establishment of the first camps, the precarious living conditions in the reception centres, and the challenges faced by migrants, including the inadequate accommodation facilities, especially at some of the semi-formal camps (Minca & Collins, 2021; Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020). Other themes explored include the role of United Nations (UN) agencies on the ground in the area, the relationship between informal migration in this region and the EU’s management of its external borders (Ahmetašević & Mlinarević, 2019; Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020), the impact of solidarity networks (Hameršak, 2021; Zocchi, 2023), and ‘local perspectives’ on the presence of migrants in the canton (Helms, 2023; Hromadžić, 2020a). However, less attention has been devoted to the closure of formal camps and the demolition of informal camps in the region, especially in the years following the Covid-19 pandemic, and how these interventions have led to a radical reconfiguration of formal and informal migrant geographies in Bihać and Velika Kladuša in particular.

Hence, in dialogue with the recent literature on the camp geographies of the Balkan Route in this part of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the chapter discusses how key decisions related to the closure (and in some cases, opening) of camps in the Una-Sana Canton have dramatically impacted the presence and visibility of people-on-the-move in this border region, while crucially redefining their informal mobilities and associated spatialities. To this end, we outline the camp geographies that characterized the initial increase in the arrival of migrants from the Balkan Route in 2018, before analysing the subsequent emergence of an archipelago of formal and informal camps. The remainder of the chapter examines the authorities’ decision to systematically close, evict, or demolish nearly all camps located in urban areas (with the exception of a camp for minors and families), while simultaneously relocating all single adult male migrants to a camp opened in a remote area near Bihać. These decisions have categorically changed the camp geography of this key region for the Balkan Route.

The following pages are the outcome of extensive fieldwork carried out by the first author in the cities of Bihać and Velika Kladuša since late 2022, multiple visits to the region by the second author since 2018, and preliminary research in Bosnia and Herzegovina by the third author from autumn 2023. More specifically, the first author spent five months in the field across 2023 and 2024, conducting extensive participant observation in formal camps, make-shift camps, and the main gathering places for migrants in the two cities, and completed forty-two semi-structured interviews with people-on-the-move – including young single men, single women, and families – as well as humanitarian workers, non-governmental organization (NGO) staff working at transit centres, local authorities, activists, and volunteers. The first author has also built on her extensive prior experience of living and working in Bihać since 2019, and the networks and contextual knowledge she has formed over several years. The interviews with migrants and refugees were conducted anonymously, while other participants were given the opportunity to choose whether to remain anonymous. Most of the interviews focused on the development of the local camp system over time, and the impact of the closure of individual camps on formal and informal refugee geographies in the canton.

## THE NEW BALKAN ROUTE AND THE ARCHIPELAGO OF ‘TEMPORARY RECEPTION’ CAMPS

In Bihać, the presence of individual refugees was initially somewhat scattered. In July 2018, approximately 200 people were allowed to stay in the Dom Penzionera, a dilapidated, unfinished building in the city centre once intended to become a retirement home (Hromadžić, 2020b). Later, when Mayor Šuhret Fazlić declared that the retirement home was unsafe, this group was transferred to the Borići student dormitory, an informal camp on the outskirts of Bihać (Vladislavljević, 2018). The informal Borići camp was initially set up in an empty building that had been abandoned for years. Its windows and doors were missing; the interior was covered in graffiti, the roof was in disrepair, and the concrete floor was riddled with holes that accumulated rainwater (Boitiaux, 2018).

In Velika Kladuša, the local population initially displayed empathy towards the refugees and strove to help by donating clothes, soap, and other needed items, or hosting children and families in their private homes. There were also multiple instances in which restaurant or café staff did not charge refugees who were evidently injured or in need (Augustová, 2020). At the same time, people-on-the-move were finding refuge in a relatively large semi-make-shift camp in Trnovi (see Figure 6.1). The use of this site – on a plot of land near the Croatian border that had previously housed a boarding kennel for dogs – and the pitching of tents there was approved by the authorities. The residents of this



Source: Photos by C. Minca, July 2018.

*Figure 6.1 The Trnovi Camp, Velika Kladuša*

semi-improvised camp queued each morning to use makeshift showers set up by volunteers (Augustová et al., 2023b). The camp served as a temporary shelter for migrants preparing to attempt to cross the border into Croatia, in some cases having walked for days or weeks through forests and mountains to reach the border area (Ibid.). Some of these individuals had already been pushed back several times by the Croatian border police (Ibid.). Indeed, within a few months of 2018, in response to the increase of arrivals in Bosnia, the Croatian authorities shifted their focus to the Bosnian border. They adopted the same strategies they had previously used on the border with Serbia, including militarizing the border and frequently pushing border crossers back into Bosnia and Herzegovina (Human Rights Watch, 2018). As early as July 2018, Croatia received EU funding for additional border surveillance resources – including control towers, thermal imaging cameras, drones, and helicopters – to assist with these interception operations (O’Reilly, 2022).

The initial insufficiency of formal reception centres in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2018 made registering and counting people-on-the-move challenging and prone to imprecision (Minca & Umek, 2020). Nevertheless,

nearly 25,000 new arrivals were registered by the Bosnian government in 2018 (IOM, n.d.). Between July and October 2018, four temporary reception centres (TRCs) were finally established in Una-Sana Canton (Ahić & Halilović Kibrić, 2023). According to an employee of a UN agency involved in their opening, ‘the primary objective of these centres was to accommodate individuals, register them, issue identity cards, and provide NFIs’ (interviewed in Bihać, 2023).

The first official camp in Una-Sana Canton was the TRC Sedra in Cazin (see Figure 6.2), a few kilometres from the town of Bihać. It was opened by IOM on 25 July 2018 (UNCT Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2018) in cooperation with the Ministry of Security and the Service for Foreigners’ Affairs (SFA), as well as other humanitarian partners. The ‘Sedra camp’ was set up to house families and unaccompanied minors and had a maximum capacity of 450. Sedra was a recently closed hotel originally built during the Yugoslav era, and now rented from a private individual by IOM (Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020). A few months after the Sedra camp was established, IOM opened another facility in Velika Kladuša, the TRC Miral, by repurposing a former PVC door factory located



Source: Photo by R. Gentili, October 2023.

Figure 6.2 The abandoned TRC Sedra, Cazin

a few kilometres from the Croatian border. This new camp was specifically designed for single men and unaccompanied minors, with a capacity of 700 people (Delauney, 2019).

Given the uptick in arrivals and the associated shortage of accommodation for single men, in October 2018 IOM decided to open an additional TRC in a former refrigerator factory in Bihać (Šantić et al., 2022), which had the capacity to accommodate up to 1,500 men and unaccompanied minors. The factory was originally built in 1982 as a production plant for Bira, a Gorenje Group company (Zocchi, 2022). In 2015, the company went bankrupt, and the building fell out of use. Initially, the camp consisted mainly of large tents located inside the factory, each housing up to 200 people. Later, containers were added. As described by Minca and Umek (2020: 5), ‘the situation inside “Bira”, [...] is that of another “city within a city”, with a large waiting population, with barbershops and makeshift food stalls, and with a separate section for women and minors’. Unaccompanied minors were housed in ‘Zone F’, which was marked off and accessible only to dedicated humanitarian organizations. Under certain circumstances, particularly before the establishment of the official Borići camp, the site also housed families with children when there was no room for them at TRC Sedra. As a result of the constant pushbacks by the Croatian border police, many people-on-the-move remained in Bira for long periods of time, in some cases for an entire year (Zocchi, 2024).

The Bira camp was characterized by constant darkness and a lack of natural light due very few windows. Its architecture, typical of factories of this kind, made it difficult for the residents to distinguish between day and night. Overall, the living conditions were uncomfortable and unsanitary for those staying there:

At first, the situation at Bira was not good at all, but it was definitely better than [at] Borići. In the area dedicated to single men, people were sleeping on the floor, on carpets, and we had some blankets. Some people slept in the mosque; we slept wherever we could find space. The problem was that there were so many people, and the competent organizations didn’t know how to manage the situation. There was one doctor, and every day at least 50 people were in line. The problems were various: skin problems, bacterial infections, scabies, fever. They didn’t know how to handle the situation because people were coming back from the ‘Game’ in dirty clothes after having slept in the jungle. Eventually, they started managing the quarantine after the Game. (Migrant from Pakistan, interviewed online in June 2024)

Following the opening of TRCs Sedra, Miral, and Bira, in January 2019, the old student dormitory ‘Borići’, which had long been informally occupied by migrants, was renovated by IOM and officially opened as a temporary reception centre to accommodate women, families, and minors (UNCT Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2019b). It is worth noting that TRCs have only been established

within the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina,<sup>1</sup> and specifically in two cantons: Una-Sana Canton in the northwest of the country, and Sarajevo Canton (Gadžo-Šašić & Repovac Nikšić, 2022). Although the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy confirmed on several occasions that the funds provided by the EU to strengthen migration management capacities were intended to be used throughout the country and not only in selected areas (Ahić & Halilović Kibrić, 2023), the authorities in the Republika Srpska officially rejected the establishment of TRCs on their territory, claiming that they lacked the capacity to provide adequate accommodation and assistance to people-on-the-move (Klix, 2018).

Most migrants initially arrived at these camps with so-called ‘police papers’, which were documents stating their ‘intention to apply for asylum’. These papers were valid in Bosnia and Herzegovina for fourteen days before an actual application for asylum was filed. Many received these documents from the SFA in Tuzla, or other field offices, after crossing into Bosnia from Serbia (Šantić et al., 2022). Indeed, those seeking access to transit centres were required to register first with the SFA Office and then with IOM, a process that included health screening and possible quarantining or medical treatment. They were then allocated accommodation and issued with a camp identity card, which was used to enter and exit the camp and to receive food, clothing, and non-food items (NFI) (Ibid.).

The archipelago of camps established in 2018 significantly changed the situation of people-on-the-move in Una-Sana Canton, especially in the cities of Bihać and Velika Kladuša, which had now become key refugee hubs along this new branch of the Balkan Route. However, the following year, with the increased arrival of new migrants, many other urban spaces in these cities were also occupied, often leading to hostile interactions with the local population (Ahmetašević, 2020; Helms, 2023). According to Lidija Skalić, a former member of the Red Cross,

Already in 2018, [a] few locals began to protest saying that they don’t [sic] want to have migrants walking on their streets because they claimed to be afraid of them. Some people created a picture of migrants in their minds that was not true; probably it was also [the] media’s fault. I remember that one day we [had] just finished our shift in Borići camp and some locals came in front of [the camp] starting the protest and throwing eggs on us. (Interviewed in Bihać, May 2023)

In 2019, the presence of migrants in the canton reached unprecedented levels. Despite the opening of the four aforementioned TRCs, there were not enough

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<sup>1</sup> Bosnia and Herzegovina is divided into two entities – the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska – and one district, Brčko.

places to accommodate the growing number of people-on-the-move through the region, many of whom began to reside in private or makeshift accommodation (Nezirović et al., 2021). According to SFA, ‘the influx of migrants in Bosnia-Herzegovina increased by over 100% in the first two months of 2019’ (Izmirljić, 2020, translated from Bosnian). Reports (UNCT Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2019a), meanwhile, stated that over 29,000 people-on-the-move were registered in the country in 2019. Other reports (see Manzin, 2018) estimated that, at one point, there were about 10,000 people in the region waiting for an(other) opportunity to cross the border (see Minca & Umek, 2020: 24). The situation thus became increasingly precarious for many and led to multiple incidents with the local authorities or the border police. For example, in October, a large group of migrants attempted to force their way across the border and remained stuck in a kind of no-man’s-land for a few days (Ibid.).

During these months, migrants were visibly present in the centres of both Bihac and Velika Kladuša at all times, while many camped informally outside the TRC Bira when it was declared full by the management. A potential humanitarian emergency was already latent, accompanied by growing hostility from the local population towards the prolonged presence of thousands of young men from Asia in the public spaces of the two cities – a presence that appeared to further exacerbate the perception of social and political marginalization among those living in the canton (Ahmetašević, 2020; Helms, 2023, 2024). In response to this precarious and potentially unsustainable situation, a shift in the local authorities’ attitude towards the presence of migrants, and related tensions with the central government in Sarajevo over the management of these people-on-the-move, led to plans in 2019 to remove migrants from the urban centres. As we shall see in the next section, this new strategy was based on a specific camp politics and an associated spatial strategy.

## CAMP CLOSURE: DISPERSING AND INVISIBILIZING MIGRANTS

As noted by Minca and Weima (Chapter 1, this volume), archipelagos of camps are often managed by authorities through a series of strategic openings and closures, with camp closures serving as a key element in the spatial management of migration (see also Weima & Minca, 2022). Therefore, the opening and closing of formal camps, along with the eviction and destruction of makeshift camps, should be thoroughly investigated to assess the impact of these interventions on people-on-the-move and their associated spatialities. Indeed, state or local authorities can decide to close certain camps and relocate residents to alternative, more distant facilities with the aim of containing, delaying, or sometimes even blocking migrants’ mobility.

This was the case in Una-Sana Canton when, in 2020, two camps were closed and their residents, together with new arrivals, were either relocated elsewhere or left without accommodation (Minca & Umek, 2020). Already in mid-June 2019, based on a decision by Bihać City Council and the Cantonal Operational Group<sup>2</sup> set up for ‘the coordination and supervision of the migrant crisis’, hundreds of migrants living outside reception centres – primarily in informal camps, parks, and private accommodation – were relocated to Vučjak. This site, an abandoned landfill located approximately 10 kilometres from Bihać and 8 kilometres from the Croatian border, became a new camp on land contaminated with toxic waste (Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020). The EU and UN agencies, including IOM, immediately rejected the choice of Vučjak as a place for people to stay, refusing to assist in this operation (Ibid.). IOM in particular stated that,

Vučjak poses a significant health and safety risk and is currently not equipped to accommodate migrants and refugees according to international standards [...] The area is also near minefields. There is a significant fire hazard due to the possible presence of methane underground, given that the site was previously a landfill. (Izmirlić, 2020; translated from Bosnian)

Accordingly, Vučjak has been defined as a ‘semi-formal’ camp, blurring the distinction between formal/institutional and makeshift camps (Minca, 2022). Although the land was allocated by the state, and there were police stationed in a container at the entrance, the services offered were minimal. The Red Cross provided food – breakfast and lunch – twice a day in a large white tent, while residents lived in tents offered by the Turkish Red Crescent (Pozniak, 2022). Water was available only for a few hours a day, and most people used the forest as a latrine.

In an interview with Harun Emrulović, a manager with the Red Cross mobile team in Bihać, it emerged that:

We also provided migrants with first aid at the camp; sometimes the local doctor from the Bihać hospital would come to Vučjak, but then he stopped coming, and some volunteers, even international ones, from other organizations started to arrive, providing support – not medical support, but more basic things like wound dressings. There were only six of us from the Red Cross working at the camp. We provided lunch, and in this way, we could count how many migrants were in the camp. The number varied from 400 to over 1,000. Very often, the police would pick

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<sup>2</sup> ‘The Operational Group of the Una-Sana Canton is a local body tasked with coordinating responses to the ongoing migration situation, working to manage the response to migrants in the region through policy and operational measures’ (see UNCT Bosnia & Herzegovina, 2019c).

people up on the streets in Bihać and force them to march to Vučjak in large groups. (Interviewed in Bihać, May 2023)

Vučjak was known as the ‘Jungle Camp’ among people-on-the-move, given that it was essentially a designated area in the forest (Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020). While residents were allowed to leave the camp, those intercepted by the police were stopped and at times forced to walk kilometres back to Vučjak, escorted by one or more police cars. During these months, it was common to see groups of migrants sitting by the roadside under the supervision of the police, who were waiting to gather more people to lead back to Vučjak (Faktor, 2019; Janjevic, 2019; Interview with Marine Corre in Bihać, June 2023). In the autumn of 2019, conditions in Vučjak deteriorated as the number of residents reached around 2,000 (Save the Children, 2019). In early December, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, paid an official visit to the camp, after which she was reported to have strongly condemned the conditions in which its residents were forced to live: ‘The conditions here are not for human beings [...] This camp should be shut down’ (MacGregor, 2019). On some occasions, camp residents refused food and water to protest the dire living conditions. On 11 December 2019, the Vučjak camp was officially closed, and the residents were transferred to TRCs in Sarajevo and to the Salakovac Refugee Reception Centre (RRC) near Mostar (Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020; Save the Children, 2019).

The establishment of the Vučjak camp on the site of a former landfill critically highlighted the deliberate neglect and abandonment that can be suffered by migrants. Davies et al. (2017) would define this as a form of ‘hidden violence of abandonment’, where harm is not inflicted directly but rather via a systematic failure to provide necessary care and protection. The Vučjak camp experience also illustrates how structural violence operates by perpetuating harmful living conditions, thereby normalizing the suffering of people-on-the-move by virtue of what amounts to a ‘refugee ban’, characterized by institutional neglect and calculated inaction (Minca, 2022). The opening of the camp served to divert people from other makeshift camps and private accommodation throughout the canton, and especially served to move them away from the city of Bihać. This had the ambivalent effect of rendering people-on-the-move less visible in certain spaces, while simultaneously creating a precarious camp that became increasingly visible over time to journalists, activists, and other key actors, including the Human Rights Commissioner.

In October 2019, prior to the closure of the Vučjak camp, the Una-Sana Canton’s Operational Group for the coordination and supervision of the migrant crisis urged the cantonal authorities to identify alternative locations for the camp. In November 2019, the municipality of Bihać allocated a plot of land in Lipa – a site removed from any urban centre – as the only suitable

municipally owned location for a new TRC. This relocation of camp residents to a facility away from the city had long been advocated by the local authorities in Bihać, who were also opposed to keeping the TRC Bira open as recommended by IOM and the central government. This opposition stemmed largely from protests by Bihać residents at the gates of the Bira camp (Montalto Monella & Lucchesi, 2021).

The first Lipa camp was an emergency tent camp (ETC) with the capacity to host up to 1,000 single men. It was managed by IOM and officially opened on 21 April 2020 as a response to the Covid-19 emergency. The camp, which lacked running water, relied on a tank with pumps and diesel generators for its electrical power supply. Living conditions for those confined there were widely condemned as inhumane and degrading (Human Rights Watch, 2021). In March 2020, with the worldwide outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Security announced that Bosnia and Herzegovina was considering plans to close its borders. The pandemic prompted a state of emergency, resulting in the lockdown of formal camps and protests across the city of Bihać against the presence of migrants and camps in the canton (see Mustafić, 2020; Radio Sloboda Evropa, 2020; UNCT Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2020a, 2020b). These protests marked the beginning of a new phase characterized by the gradual closure of transit centres in urban Bihać and Velika Kladuša.

Protests also intensified in response to the proliferation of informal camps that year (Helms, 2023, 2024). During the initial Covid-related restrictions and border closures in spring 2020, people-on-the-move who were unable to access the overcrowded formal reception facilities or deliberately seeking to avoid them found shelter in makeshift camps. The presence of informal camps therefore significantly increased in the region, coming to host an estimated 3,000 people across over 250 locations (see Arnautović, 2020; Danish Refugee Council, 2020; Dumont, 2021). The number of residents at the Dom Penzionera building, for instance, rose to approximately 250 during the Covid-19 pandemic (Hrustanović, 2021). In parallel, another makeshift camp, located near the Bira camp and known as 'Krajina Metal', began to be occupied by people-on-the-move in the spring of 2020 (Arnautović, 2020; Dumont, 2021). In an interview, Radovan Klepić, a local resident who had worked as a chemist at the now-defunct Krajina Metal factory, explained that:

Krajina Metal was a steel factory that opened in the 1970s. It was one of the largest steel factories in the area, providing employment for approximately 4,000 people. However, the factory was closed immediately after the war and, despite its importance for the local economy, it never reopened following the privatization process. (Interviewed in Bihać, August 2024; translated from Bosnian)

For over a year, Krajina Metal remained one of the largest makeshift camps in Bihać. At the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, it housed over 400 individuals, mainly from Afghanistan, with the support of local organizations and small networks of activists who distributed food and firewood there during the winter (Arnautović, 2020; Dumont, 2021).

Despite the Covid-19 outbreak and the related border closure measures, people-on-the-move continued to arrive from the Route, increasingly finding themselves stranded in Una-Sana Canton (Amnesty International, 2021; Danish Refugee Council, 2020). In 2020, amidst the state of emergency that had been declared across Bosnia and Herzegovina, key decisions concerning camps were made. Although these moves were intended to be temporary, they appear to have become permanent in practice, with consequences that have endured over the intervening years.

As stated by a member of the Assembly of the Canton:

The Lipa camp started [out] as an emergency camp, and it is possible that, at some point, the idea of its long-term existence or transformation into a permanent camp was considered. This could be the result of changes in the dynamics of the migration crisis and accommodation needs. There was a perceived need for gradual cohesion with the local population. This might imply that the authorities wanted to avoid a sudden and potentially negative reaction from the local population, which could have occurred if it had been stated from the outset that the camp would become permanent. (Interviewed in Bihać, 2023)

A few months later, on 30 September 2020, amid protests by migrants and humanitarian organizations, TRC Bira was also shut down and many of its residents were transferred to Lipa, some 30 kilometres from the city centre (Arnautović, 2020; UNCT Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2020c). This closure of one of the largest camps along the Balkan Route at the time was the first of several similar operations that were to permanently alter migrant and refugee geographies in the town of Bihać and throughout Una-Sana Canton.

The closure of Bira was a process, which we could call an 'organizational session' by the government. Initially, with a decision made by the Skupština Canton (Cantonal Parliament), it was announced that Bira would be in lockdown, and from that moment on, no one could enter or leave Bira. But how do you explain to people that they could not go to the market or anywhere else? It was like being in a prison. Then, they allowed them to go to the Game. Only a certain number of people per day. However, if they were pushed back, they would not be allowed back into the camp. So, if a certain number of migrants left the camp every day, at some point the camp would become emptier and emptier day by day. After the summer of 2020, there were about 500 migrants in Bira, which led the authorities to decide that it was the right time to close the camp. (UN agency staff, interviewed in Bihać, 2023)

However, the Lipa camp, intended to accommodate people transferred from Bira, was already operating beyond its capacity (UNCT Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2020c). As a result, many migrants became stranded just outside the Lipa facility, where they were forced to remain for several days (Arnautović, 2020; Sharma, 2020). According to Silvia Maraone, Director of IPSIA BiH, an Italian NGO operating in Bihać since 2018,

When Bira was closed and migrants were transferred to Lipa, the latter camp was unsuitable for the upcoming autumn and winter seasons. Meanwhile, IOM repeatedly issued emergency appeals for the closure of Lipa, stating that the conditions there were unliveable and would expose residents to dangerously low temperatures. (Interviewed in Bihać, 2023; translated from Italian)

In keeping with this position, IOM strongly condemned the local authorities' decision to close Bira, arguing that the Lipa camp was not only not ready but also ill-equipped to withstand the region's extreme winter temperatures (Sharma, 2020). They urged the central government to identify a suitable alternative (Zocchi, 2022). On 7 December 2020, the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, expressed similar concerns in a letter to Bosnia and Herzegovina's Minister of Security, Selmo Cikotić, and to the President of its Council of Ministers, Zoran Tegeltija (Mijatović, 2020). In particular, Mijatović highlighted the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Una-Sana Canton, noting that a year after the closure of the Vučjak camp in December 2019, another crisis was emerging due to the severely substandard living conditions in the Lipa tent camp, which lacked electricity and running water and was overcrowded following the transfer of residents from Bira. She underlined the humanitarian consequences of closing down Bira and banning new admissions to Miral camp, actions that had left hundreds of migrants, including families with children, without shelter, food, and medical care (Ibid.).

In light of this situation, IOM announced the permanent closure of the Lipa camp, despite the lack of alternatives for accommodating migrants (Kovacevic, 2020a). On 23 December 2020, ETC Lipa was officially shut down due to its unsuitability for winter conditions (Assessment Capacities Project [ACAPS], 2021; IOM, 2021a). However, during this process, a massive fire erupted, destroying the camp. Consequently, all humanitarian workers had to evacuate from the site, leaving the former residents stranded around the remnants of the camp. In an interview, a former resident of Lipa recounted that:

The tent next to mine caught fire, but none of us were there at the time. Some organizations blamed migrants for starting the fire, but that wasn't true. IOM was in the process of evacuating the camp, and when the fire broke out, we were already outside. The entire camp was empty. How could migrants have started a fire inside? Why would we set fire to our own sleeping place? [...] After the fire, we had to sleep

in the jungle for 15 days. It was very hard. We had no food and no proper place to sleep. I built a shelter myself, and 35 of us slept there. We didn't have permission to go to Bihać, so we were stuck in the jungle. We had to shower with cold water from a small waterfall downhill from Lipa camp. (Migrant from Pakistan, interviewed in Bihać, July 2024)

With the destruction of Lipa, the humanitarian situation for migrants in Bosnia and Herzegovina deteriorated dramatically, while activists, volunteers, photographers, and journalists flocked to Bihać to cover the events. Accordingly, Una-Sana Canton began to receive international media attention, as had happened the previous year over the situation at Vučjak (Zocchi, 2023). On 29 December 2020, state authorities attempted to transfer all residents from Lipa to Bradina, a former military barracks in the municipality of Konjic, 45 kilometres from Sarajevo (Al Jazeera, 2020; ANSA, 2021). In an interview conducted in the autumn of 2023 with an employee of a humanitarian organization that had been operating in TRCs in the Una-Sana Canton in 2020, it emerged that the initial plan had been to transport fifteen busloads of migrants to Bradina. However, when the local population in Bradina began protesting this decision, the buses were rerouted (interviewed in Bihać, 2023). In addition, the Republika Srpska continued to deny any form of cooperation. After 24 hours on the buses, the migrants were brought back to Lipa (Al Jazeera, 2020). Their attempts to return to Bihać were, however, systematically blocked by police in the environs of Ripač (BVMN, 2021a; Kovacevic, 2020a).

On 30 December 2020, the central government finally decided that Lipa should be transformed into an official reception centre, with state authorities responsible for its management and IOM providing technical and financial support through funding received from the European Union (IOM, 2021a). At this point, as many as 900 people were still stranded on the site of the former ETC Lipa without access to basic services and adequate accommodation (ACAPS, 2021; Oddone, 2021). Many began living in makeshift camps in the surrounding forest, where they were fully exposed to winter weather conditions. Some went on hunger strike, demanding a dignified accommodation solution with immediate effect (Bierbach, 2021). All in all, the closure of Lipa further reinforced the 'ban' on these migrants by stranding them at the site of the formal camp and failing to provide alternative forms of accommodation locally.

In January 2021, groups of local residents in Bihać continued to gather outside the former Bira camp to oppose the possible re-opening of the facility. All efforts by the national government to compel Bihać City Council to relocate people from the Lipa camp to Bira were therefore met with resistance and were ultimately unsuccessful (Al Jazeera, 2020; Bierbach, 2021; Kovacevic, 2020b). In the absence of a viable solution to provide adequate facilities for the approximately 1,000 displaced individuals, the central government deployed

the army to set up an improvised camp in Lipa, consisting of twelve military tents, each capable of accommodating up to twenty people (Oddone, 2021). This provisional camp was directly managed by the SFA, which took over the administration of Lipa in collaboration with IOM. Finally, in November of that year, a new Lipa camp was inaugurated, with a capacity of 1,500, including designated spaces for families and unaccompanied minors.

Overall, the closure of the Bira camp marked the initial phase of a broader strategy aimed at eliminating the archipelago of camps in urban areas, which had been accommodating thousands of people-on-the-move since 2018. The goal of these closures was to diminish the visibility of irregularized migrants in Una-Sana Canton, effectively bringing an end to the protests and anti-migrant movements that had defined the summer of 2020 (Klix, 2020). However, this strategy also necessitated dismantling the existing archipelago of informal camps, a process that we shall explore in the next section.

In April 2022, the Ministry of Security instructed IOM and SFA to also halt the registration and reception of new arrivals at TRC Miral and to initiate the transfer of Miral residents to Lipa by 1 May. Officially, this decision was based on the observed decrease in migratory arrivals through Bosnia and Herzegovina and the availability of unused capacity at Lipa (Ministry of Security, 2022). The Ministry emphasized the urgency of closing the Miral camp and the need to relocate migrants outside the municipality of Velika Kladuša and other urban areas in order to enhance security for local citizens (Alagić, 2022). The Miral camp held significant strategic importance due to its geographical location, as it was the only camp in Velika Kladuša. Most migrants began their journeys to cross the Croatian border from this area, favoured for its flat terrain. With the closure of Miral, its residents were forcibly transferred to the newly established Lipa camp, in accordance with the Ministry's operational guidelines.

## THE END OF THE ARCHIPELAGO OF INFORMAL CAMPS

As noted earlier, informal camps had been present in Una-Sana Canton since 2018, despite frequent evictions (and some closures) by local authorities. In 2021, with the establishment of a semi-permanent camp managed by the SFA in Lipa and the construction work of the new Lipa reception centre underway, the authorities set out not only to complete the closure of the remaining facilities located in the main cities but also to continue evicting and dismantling all informal camps in urban areas, with the relocation of their residents to Lipa.

As observed above, makeshift camps in Bihać and Velika Kladuša became particularly overcrowded during the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic, as the formal camps reached full capacity and many people sought refuge in the 'jungle', abandoned buildings, or old factories. For example, Ali (pseudonym),

a migrant from Pakistan, was denied re-access to Bira during the pandemic and was forced to shelter in a makeshift camp in the city:

I spent about a year at Bira. During Covid if you [went] to the Game and [were] pushed back, you had three days to return. One of the last times I went to the Game, I was pushed back from Slovenia, and when I returned to Bira, they did not allow me to enter, saying that I had three days to come back and that they had already expired. It was difficult because I slept outside. Then I went to Dom Penzionera, where I found a small room, I cleaned it, made a fire, and managed to spend my nights there. One day, I went to find a supermarket to buy some bread, and the police arrived and beat me. They told me that I could not go out after 6 pm. I was in the camp when the pandemic started and did not know about the curfew. During [my] time at Dom Penzionera, Bosnian people were very kind and helped us a lot. Some local activists brought us food and wood for the fire. (Migrant from Pakistan, interviewed in Bihać, August 2024)

During this period, Krajina Metal and Dom Penzionera remained the largest makeshift camps in Bihać. In Velika Kladuša, a tented area informally dubbed ‘the Helicopter’ was a further key informal site used by people-on-the-move (BVMN, 2021b: 6). The police and the SFA frequently cleared these spaces, relocating residents to the official TRCs or leaving them to fend for themselves. However, within a few days, the migrants would return to occupy these locations once more.

Between May and July 2021, local authorities and the municipality of Bihać carried out a comprehensive operation to dismantle both the Krajina Metal and Dom Penzionera (Figure 6.3) informal camps, transferring their residents to Lipa (BVMN, 2021b; Klix, 2021). An employee of a UN agency operating in Una-Sana Canton (interviewed in Bihać, 2023), noted that the local community exerted considerable pressure on local authorities. In response, these authorities pressured IOM to open a new camp at Lipa. The decision to evict people-on-the-move from Krajina Metal and Dom Penzionera, and subsequently other informal camps, was driven by similar pressure from segments of the Bihać local community, aimed at relocating all migrants away from the city centre.

In autumn 2021, ‘the Helicopter’ in Velika Kladuša, which hosted at any given time between 50 and 250 individuals, was also subjected to multiple forced evictions by the authorities. It was definitively closed down on 24 November (BVMN, 2021b: 6). Residents were forced to come out of their tents, pack what they could, and board buses, not knowing where they would be taken.

Officially, the new Lipa camp was intended to also accommodate families and minors. Consequently, on 1 July 2021, the TRC Sedra was also closed, displacing families and minors who were residing there (IOM, 2021b). However, this decision did not adequately consider the unsuitability of Lipa as a site



Source: Photo by R. Gentili, May 2021.

Figure 6.3 The closure of Dom Penzionera, Bihać

for hosting families and unaccompanied minors. Some families were therefore transported to the TRC Borići, which had remained open during all these developments, while others set up improvised camps or sought refuge in abandoned buildings (Zocchi, 2022). Some chose to live in abandoned houses in villages in the Una Valley that had been partially deserted after the conflicts of the 1990s, particularly in Šturlić and Bosanska Bojna, which are near the Croatian border and relatively distant from the larger urban centres (Associated Press, 2021; BVMN, 2021a).

## CONCLUSION

The archipelago of formal, semi-formal, and informal camps in Una-Sana Canton has been almost completely transformed since 2018. Initially, when large numbers of refugees and migrants began to arrive in the canton, they struggled to successfully cross the border with Croatia. This generated what has been described as a ‘bottleneck’, with more and more people arriving

but fewer able to pass through (Šantić et al., 2022; Umek & Minca, 2020; Zocchi, 2023). At that time, there were no formal camps, and makeshift settlements quickly emerged in Bihać, as well as in villages and areas closer to the border. However, by early 2019, four formal reception centres had opened (namely TRCs Sedra, Miral, Bira, and Borići). As discussed in this chapter, three of these original ‘formal’ camps have since closed, along with nearly all the makeshift encampments that sprang up over the years. Additionally, other formal and semi-formal camps have been opened, closed, and even re-opened. While the ‘bottleneck’ has lessened over time – due to changes in the policing of the Croatian border and fluctuations in the number of people arriving in the canton – camps have remained the primary accommodation for irregularized migrants in Una-Sana.

The camps in the canton have varied greatly (and individual camps continue to vary over time) in terms of the basic conditions they offer and the basic needs they meet (or do not meet). What they all have in common is that every camp – from the most makeshift to the most formal – has served as a crucial node in the reproduction of this branch of the Balkan Route. As a lowest common denominator, all these camps have been places for people to stay while preparing to attempt or re-attempt crossing the border with Croatia, or while resting and recovering after experiencing pushbacks. In this sense, camps are not only a response to but also essential components of the ongoing ‘Game’. The establishment of encampments by both people-on-the-move and institutions has both responded to and sought to shape this evolving branch of the Route, which has continued to remain active in this canton at the time of writing. On the one hand, this chapter has illustrated how the continuous closures and evictions have primarily been executed by state and institutional actors, who have shaped the Route within the canton via a distinct camp politics and set of spatial strategies. On the other hand, however, the evolution of Una-Sana Canton’s camp archipelago has also been shaped by a variety of other actors over time, including the people-on-the-move themselves, local and international volunteers and activists who supported them, and local protestors and activists who opposed the presence of irregularized migrants. A further influence on the changing face of the camp archipelago may be attributed to the interplay between the provision and withdrawal of support by national and international institutions; European and international organizations; and municipal, cantonal, and state authorities.

In this chapter, we have aimed to demonstrate the clear relationship between the opening and closing of formal migrant camps and the emergence and later dissolution of the archipelago of makeshift camps throughout the Una-Sana Canton. This relationship has played out in several ways. First, the hesitancy to open formal centres, coupled with their inadequacy as the bottleneck in the canton increased, led to a proliferation of makeshift camps – as was initially

the case in 2018, and on several more occasions over the following years. At times, this inadequacy became highly visible, particularly at the entrances of formal camps. For example, in 2019, the TRC Bira faced the arrival of a number of migrants that exceeded its capacity. Furthermore, the opening of formal camps has frequently coincided with the eviction of informal encampments, such as the removal of hundreds of migrants and refugees residing in informal accommodations in Bihać to the semi-formal Vučjak site. However, this has not been a one-time, one-directional process; the closure of formal (and semi-formal) camps has at times, unsurprisingly, led to an increase in informal encampments. A notable example is the infamous fire at Lipa in December 2020, which, combined with the lack of suitable alternative sites, forced many people to sleep rough at the burned site for an extended period. Similarly, the closure of TRC Sedra in 2021 pushed many families to live in abandoned buildings in the border region or in improvised camps.

Ultimately, however, the gradual opening of new formal camps over the years has facilitated the progressive erasure of the archipelago of makeshift camps across the region, thereby formalizing and securitizing the reception of migrants in the canton. In addition, the eviction, over the years, of the informal encampments has considerably reduced, though never entirely erased, the presence of people-on-the-move in city and town centres, particularly in Bihać and Velika Kladuša. While some of the initial formal camps were opened in urban areas (such as the TRCs Bira and Miral), security concerns raised by both protesting residents and the authorities led to their closure and the deliberate distancing of migrant and refugee accommodation from both urban areas and borders. The opening of Lipa as an emergency camp during the Covid-19 period facilitated the closure of TRC Miral in urban Velika Kladuša and TRC Bira in urban Bihać. Later, the eviction of the Krajina Metal and Dom Penzionera squats in Bihać in 2021 was also facilitated by the (re)opening of Lipa as a temporary reception centre.

TRC Borići remains today an exception to this strategic 'distancing' policy and appears to meet greater tolerance due to its role hosting families, women, and minors.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, rumours of plans to close it persist as we write, particularly during periods when the number of people-on-the-move in the canton is relatively low. The formalization of accommodation has also been accompanied by increased securitization, evident in the construction of fences and surveillance systems around camps. Exceptional levels of securitization were observed during the Covid-19 emergency, when stringent mobility restrictions were placed on camp residents that did not entirely apply to other residents of the canton; this was only made possible by the migrants' containment in the

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<sup>3</sup> This was true at the time of writing, however Borići has now closed.

camps. In conclusion, this chapter underscores the importance of critically examining the underlying political strategies that have informed the creation, maintenance, and closure of camps, as well as their profound impact on the mobility, visibility, and rights of migrants in this specific region. This analysis is relevant within the Una-Santa Canton itself, but also in the context of broader changes to the extended camp archipelago along the entire Balkan Route (on this, see also Chapter 2, this volume).

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DATA AVAILABILITY – Data are stored in the following online repositories, on AMS Acta: <https://doi.org/10.6092/unibo%2Famsacta%2F8556>; <https://doi.org/10.6092/unibo%2Famsacta%2F8557>; <https://doi.org/10.6092/unibo%2Famsacta%2F8558>