Bosnia and Herzegovina: A Migrant Hotspot at the Gates of Fortress Europe

Elisabetta Deidda

Supervisor: Branka Likić-Brborić
“Against whom was the Great Wall to provide protection? Against the people of the south. I come from the north-west. No southern people can threaten us here. We read about them in ancient texts. The cruelties they commit, in accordance with their nature, make us have a sigh on our peaceful promenades.

[...] But more than this we do not know about these southerners. We haven’t seen them, and if we stay in our village, we never will see them, even if they rush at us. So vast is the country that it will not allow them to reach us. They will run themselves lost in the empty air.”

Abstract

This thesis is a qualitative study focusing on the situation that has evolved in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) from the beginning of 2018, when migrants and refugees started entering the country in large numbers in the context of the so-called Balkan route. The approach adopted in the thesis is informed by critical studies emphasizing the asymmetries entailed in the emerging multilevel governance of migration. The European Union (EU), the BiH state, IOM, civil society, activists, and citizens, are inserted in a “situational map” presenting their inter-relations, and the potential of each to influence the situation of concern. This thesis analyses in details the role of the EU, which is implementing in BiH its security-informed approach to irregular migration through externalization and multilevelling strategies. Eight semi-structured interviews allow the investigation into the potential and challenges of a “governance from below”. The main argument of this thesis is that the EU, outsourcing its strategy to curb irregular migration to BiH, fails to address the humanitarian crisis that is developing there, besides mining the stability and democracy of the country.

Keywords: Balkan route; Bosnia and Herzegovina; European Union; externalization; securitization; IOM; migration management; migration control; border control; refugee crisis; migrants; refugees.
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Acronyms and Abbreviations

BiH – Bosnia and Herzegovina
BVMN – Border Violence Monitoring Network
CSO – Civil society organization
EC – European Commission
EU – European Union
FBiH – Federacija Bosne i Hercegovine
Frontex – European Border and Coast Guard Agency
IOM – International Organization for Migration
IPA – Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
NGO – Non-governmental Organization
OHR – Office of the High Representative
OSCE – Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
UNCT – United Nations Country Team
UNDP – United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
RS – Republika Srpska
SAA – Stabilisation and Association Agreement
SFA – Service for Foreigners’ Affairs
TCR – Temporary Reception Centre
WB – Western Balkans
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Map of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Figure 1. Political map of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In light peach-colour the Republika Srpska, which is divided into municipalities, while the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is divided into cantons. In the up-left corner, in green, the Una-Sana Canton. Retrieved from https://www.worldometers.info/maps/bosnia-and-herzegovina-political-map/
1. Introduction

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) became a key-country of the Balkan Route during the winter 2017/2018, when more and more migrants and refugees started entering the country, especially from Serbia, following the strengthening of border controls between Serbia and Hungary, and between Serbia and Croatia. As of March 2020, some 50,000 people have entered BiH (IOM, n.d.-a), a country not capable – nor willing – of providing an adequate response to the needs of these people. On the other hand, the European Union (EU) seems to have found in BiH an ideal “buffer-zone” in which to keep people on the move preventing them from crossing its external border. What is happening in BiH, I argue in this thesis, is the implementation, by the EU, of a security-informed approach to irregular migration through externalization; a governance from afar of the undesired migrants and refugees that the EU has not succeeded in establishing a unified way to deal with.

Overall, my thesis is an attempt to address the situation unfolding in BiH from the multiplicity of perspectives represented by the actors engaged in it. First of all, I discuss how the externalization of the EU approach to irregular migration is performed in BiH, and against this background, I explore the positions of activists and civil society, and in particular their understandings, responses and the challenges they face in their solidarity work. Taken into account together with “higher-level” actors involved in the management of the situation, activists’ and civil society’s responses can be seen as elements of a conflicting migration governance. The perceptions, interests, fears, strategies of all the actors involved, including ordinary citizens, often conflict and affect each other, especially in the downward direction from the more powerful, to the weaker actor. But this direction might sometimes be reversed. Because of the recent history of BiH, and of its current economic and political situation – the war of the 1990s, which turned millions of citizens into displaced people and refugees; current high levels of poverty, unemployment and emigration; an unstable political system based on ethnopolitics – the responses of ordinary people to the massive entry of migrants and refugees are all but predictable, and worth discussing.

In the following pages, the most important voices might seem to be missing. Robbed, beaten, pushed-back, stocked in these buffer-zones where opportunities are missing for anyone, people on the move seem passive victims, while, on the contrary, they have strong agency. Their being there, is a sign of this agency. People on the move shape the migratory routes, reacting to the obstacles which are put on their way. This agency, and the experiences of people on the move, even though central in the situation that I chose to discuss, enter in this thesis only marginally. Instead I chose to focus on the “receiving” end, and in particular on the EU securitization approach, designed to protect people and institutions within “Fortress Europe” and the consequences of its outsourcing to
the immediate periphery of the Fortress, in which residents are often in need themselves – of money, security, rights, jobs – but from which at times arise solidarity and resistance. This thesis aims at being a critical study of a migration system which affects certain people’s lives in the name of the perceived “security” of others, bringing thus into light the power structures in which countries and people are inserted.

1.1. Aim of the Thesis and Research Questions

The overall aim of my research is to analyse the current situation brought about by the recent migratory phenomenon involving BiH. In order to produce this analysis, I adopt a multilevel approach which takes into account the main actors involved in the situation, each with its particular goals, strategies and struggles. The result will consist of a “situational map” presenting the positions of the selected actors involved in it that were the object of my analysis, and most importantly the relations between these actors and between the actions and inactions of each. I proceed towards this aim by addressing four main research questions:

- How is the EU approach to migration management established, performed, and maintained in the context of BiH?
  - How does the cooperation between the EU and international organizations such as IOM in BiH evolve?
  - Which is the position and role of the Bosnian state institutions in the situation?
- Which role and room for action do solidarity groups, activists and civil society have in the situation of concern?
- How are the responses and attitudes of ordinary citizens of BiH understood by the activists and civil society workers that I interviewed?
- How are all these actors relating with each other, and how do their goals, expectations and strategies interrelate and affect each other?

1.2. Previous Studies

In writing this thesis I used and referred to a number of studies which have been conducted either in the context of the Balkan route, more specifically in the context of BiH, or on the wider theme of the EU strategy to curb irregular migration in transit countries. When it comes to BiH, I noticed the presence of a gap in the material that I used in order to analyse the situation unfolding in the country. Many of the actors – journalists, activists, civil society organizations (CSOs) – writing
about the current situation concentrate on issues such as human rights violations and episodes of border violence. These elements are for sure crucial and are the most evident signs of a non-functioning and problematic system, but in order to be comprehended, they need to be contextualized and analysed within a broader critical discussion about the EU governance of migration. Such governance, informed by securitization, entails the control and management of irregular immigration by means like externalization and multilevelling. My work is an attempt to fill this gap, by providing an analysis of the current situation in BiH within the framework of the EU approach to irregular migration, in its implementation in third countries.

As a matter of fact, some researchers have already done similar work in the context of the Balkan route. Research by Beznec, Speer, and Stojić Mitrović (2016), besides providing a thorough account of the evolvement of the Balkan route in 2015 and 2016, also addresses the role that the EU had in shaping the responses of North Macedonia and Serbia, the two countries on which the research focuses, through externalization of migration control and management. The authors understand the move towards externalization, by the EU, as a consequence of migration becoming a security issue, an argument that I also elaborate in my thesis. Furthermore, they extensively show how such externalization was facilitated by existing ties between the EU and the two Balkan countries, connected to the promise of EU membership, a condition that applies to BiH as well. Ahmetašević and Mlinarević (2019) research is instead focused on BiH, and analyses how the situation developed in the country throughout 2018. Many of the themes that the authors address, I attempted to develop even further, by inserting them within a broader discussion on the EU approach to irregular migration. In particular, they provide an account of the response that state authorities have provided and address the issue of the EU funds and of their assignation to IOM, of which they denounce the questionable response by providing several arguments with evidence. Particularly relevant, for my research, is the discussion on the consequence that an involvement to such a great extent of a non-state actor in the management of the situation in question has especially in terms of accountability, and problems it causes for democracy. Besides the detailed overviews of the situations on which they focus, and the theoretical insights that this and the aforementioned research offered me, they were particularly inspiring for their overall research approach, therefore I decided to adopt it into my work as well. Both Ahmetašević and Mlinarević (2019) and Beznec et al. (2016), combined a well-argued and founded analysis of the situations of concern, with a critical standpoint which they assumed to identify problems and point out responsibilities.

Finally, a piece of research which has been very useful to understand the relationship between the EU and IOM, and how the latter often figures as implementor of the former’s migration policy abroad, was an article by Brachet (2016), on the IOM’s involvement in Libya. The article outlines
very clearly the relationship of sponsorship existent between the UN agency and the EU, and how the former’s action in Libya is driven by the goal to fulfil the Union’s, rather than its target population’s needs. This research, which refers to a different context from the one that I focus on in my research, was fundamental to understand the degree of locality/globality of the phenomenon that I address in this thesis. As it appears, the role that the EU is today playing in BiH, is in line with a general and broader understanding of irregular migration governance, which is applied to other contexts as well. This approach constitutes, in this thesis, the framework of my analysis of the current situation in BiH.

1.3. Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is structured as follows. In the current introductory chapter, I present the overall aim and research questions that guided my work, the previous studies from which I was inspired, and a glossary listing a few concepts and expressions that I use in my work, with an explanation of why I decided to use them. This chapter should provide the reader with an overall idea of the themes that the thesis addresses, and with a few basic concepts needed to understand what comes next.

The second chapter presents the methodological and analytical approach that I adopted in my work. Besides explaining the procedure that I followed in collecting and analysing my data, I also state some epistemological assumptions, which have informed how I approached the data.

Next comes the theory chapter, where I present the theoretical framework in which I inserted my discussion. The framework is that of multilevel governance of migration; in the chapter I discuss some theoretical concepts useful to understand the strategies and goals pursued by the different actors participating in the governance of migration which is being carried out in BiH. The first section of the chapter concentrates on the EU approach to irregular migration, the second on the possibilities and challenges of a governance from below.

The fourth chapter presents the background on which the current situation in BiH generated and develops. This background entails a presentation of the Balkan route and on its evolvement in recent years to finally include BiH, but also a presentation of BiH as a country whose structural problems rendered problematic in handling the situation in an adequate way.

Finally, the fifth chapter presents the analysis resulting from combining the theoretical discussion presented in chapter three, with data that I collected through semi-structured interviews and from secondary material. The chapter is divided in three sections, each addressing one of the three levels in which I divided the actors involved in the situation: at the first level there is the EU, in partnership with international organizations such as IOM; at the second national/local level,
independent activists and civil society; at the third level, citizens of BiH, from the perspectives of the interviewed activists and civil society workers.

The thesis ends with a concluding chapter, in which I wrap up the discussion developed throughout the previous chapters and formulate a critique on the migration management system currently in place in BiH.

1.4. Glossary

Refugee crisis: I use the term to refer to the events of 2015/16, which are commonly referred to as “refugee crisis”, but also to the current situation concerning people on the move in BiH. The term, from my side, is always used critically, in the sense that I consider the “crisis” a linguistic and political construction, rather than a real condition – even when not explicitly stated. In relation to the refugee crisis of 2015/2016, I adopt Šelo Šabić’s (2017) definition: “the refugee crisis […] refers to the incapacity of the European Union (EU) states to deal with a mass flow of humanity, their inability to cooperate and their weakness to uphold EU values” (p. 52, footnote).

Irregular migration: IOM defines it as a “movement of persons that takes place outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the State of origin, transit or destination” (IOM, n.d.-c). In this thesis, I use the term in a critical way, especially in relation to the fact that the label of irregularity is often attached in an arbitrary way with the goal of portraying people on the move as acting outside the law. In reality, for many asylum seekers, undertaking “irregular” journeys is the only way to reach a place where they can present their legitimate claim for asylum. Despite the ambiguity of the term, I decided to use it in order not to ignore the actual consequences that this label has on those who carry it.

Person/people on the move: a way of defining people involved in migratory processes beyond the categories of “migrant” and “refugee”, which are arbitrary and dependent on who is in the position to define, and on the goal that such definition helps pursuing. The expression also avoids defining the person through his or her current and mutable status, as the labels “migrant” and “refugee” do. Furthermore, it allows to include in one expression people migrating for many different reasons and in in many different ways. In this work, the expression always refers to individuals who are currently on a migratory journey through the Balkan peninsula and who specifically originate from countries outside the region.

Third country: in relation to the EU, a country which is not member of the Union.

Western Balkans: the Balkan countries which are not members of the EU, but are included in its enlargement plans – Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia.
2. Methodological and Analytical Approach

2.1. Main Assumptions and Overall Approach

The methodological position of the thesis has been inspired by the situational analysis, as conceptualized by Adele Clarke (2005). Departing from the crucial importance of the wider situation as an analytical basis, the author adapted grounded theory to the postmodern framework by connecting it to discourse analysis. Even though I do not follow methodically Clarke’s situational analysis, that would require the elaboration of actual “situational maps” to represent all elements of the situation and the relations among them, the idea of “mapping” is still informing my research and my writing. In the author’s words, “situational analyses seek to analyze a particular situation of interest through the specification, re-representation, and subsequent examination of the most salient elements in that situation and their relations” (Clarke, 2005, p. 29) – elements that Clarke (2005) defines “constitutive” of the situation. Dealing with these elements through the process of mapping, according to the author, has several advantages, compared to using narratives. First of all, maps allow to construct and visualize connections between elements; furthermore, maps are a “great boundary objects” which allows to handle “multiplicity, heterogeneity, and messiness”, besides always allowing to “unmapping and remapping” (Clarke, 2005, p. 30); finally, what can be seen as a limitation of maps, meaning, the particular perspective they allow on the situation, shaped by the position in time and space occupied by the analyst, Clarke sees as something that can instead improve the quality of the work – since situatedness cannot be overcome (Clarke, 2005).

As for the assumptions that inform situational analysis, and that I decided to adopt in my own research, the acknowledgment of positionality was especially crucial, when approaching all actors involved, to acknowledge the space that each of them occupies within the power structure in place, which shapes the possibility of each to have an impact on the situation itself. Moreover, the concept of positionality led me to reflect on my own role as a researcher, but also on my positionality as an EU citizen. Being an EU citizen, and given the role that the EU had in creating the situation, and is having in maintaining it, I decided that I was going to address this aspect more in depth than I had initially planned, and that my work would have taken a critical approach towards the EU strategy. The acknowledgment of one’s positionality, allows to get rid of claims of objectivity in relation to one’s own voice and perspective, and to turn into aware “immodest witnesses – acknowledgedly embodied knowers” (Clarke, 2005, p. 21), as opposed to the positivist notion of “invisible” researcher. In my view, such awareness also brings about the possibility (and the duty) of taking a stand and being critical, in the sense of letting the researcher’s voice, perspective and ideas – as far
as they are based on a properly-conducted research – emerge. Being situated, in fact, means also assuming the responsibility of acting from one’s own position, and for what that position allows, to bring about social change in the direction that our knowledge about the situation and our understanding of the world suggest.

Secondly, the understanding of the “situation” as the central unit of analysis, allowed me to concentrate on the case of BiH without feeling the need to make general claims. I decided to focus on BiH and on the situation that has unfolded there, keeping in mind that such situation is the result of the particular relations existent between all actors involved. As Clarke (2005) states, referring to the concept of Gestalt, “a situation is always greater than the sum of its parts because it includes their relationality in a particular temporal and spatial moment” (p. 23). This concept is crucial in my research, where I attempt to present the actors involved – the EU, the state of BiH, the people of BiH, activists and civil society –, with their different degrees of power, and to explain how their respective goals, strategies, and expectations interrelate. It is this interplay what renders unique and unrepeatable the “situation” of concern. Thirdly, the acknowledgment that the situation and the actions (and inactions) of the actors shaping it, come with several inconsistencies, ambiguities, and complexities, led to the decision to deal with such inconsistencies without attempting to simplify them, or render them coherent. On the contrary, highlighting such incoherencies and failed expectations will provide a better picture of the empirical (social) world in which very rarely appears to be consistency. Finally, the previous reflection leads to the acknowledgment that the analysis will not be conclusive and resolutive, but rather open and doubtful, because of its complexity and constant evolution. For the same reasons, it will not be able to generate a theory, or even to fit perfectly in an already existent theory. Theories guide my analysis but stepping out of their paths does not constitute a problem – it is rather enriching for the theories themselves.

My work, thus, consists of a multilevel analysis of the current situation in BiH, an analysis which aims to take into account the actors involved at different levels, and to bring to the surface the dynamics that are constantly developing among them. Inspired by Clarke’s situational analysis, I attempt to produce and present a “cartography” of the “heterogeneity of positions taken in the situation” (Clarke, 2005, p. 25), with a particular focus on the asymmetry of power existent between the actors occupying such positions.

Finally, as for my general approach, it will be a critical one, as defined by Nygaard (2017): an approach which entails looking beyond the immediately visible, “to consider the larger social structures and distribution of power behind them” (p. 27). Most importantly, for my research, critical approaches do not aim simply at explaining the world, but also at bringing about social change (Nygaard, 2017). The approach that I decided to adopt, aims both at highlighting the power
structures and relations shaping the situation considered, and at moving a critique against them, by bringing into light the consequences that such power asymmetries have for both people on the move, and for BiH and its citizens.

2.2. The Collection of Data

This is a qualitative study that employs triangulation both in terms of data collection and their analysis (Rothbauer, 2008). Besides the field notes collected during my three-months stay in Sarajevo, during which I talked with a number of local and international people, who contributed to my wider understanding of the situation, I gathered mainly two kinds of material. These are: semi-structured interviews, which constitute my primary data, that were carried out for this specific research and that also constitute the core of my research, and secondary material including reports, governmental documents, EU documents, and research studies conducted on similar topics. For what concerns my primary data, they were collected through eight semi-structured interviews, each lasting between one and one and a half hours, with selected informants that I met in person in BiH, in most cases in Sarajevo. In accordance with the definition of semi-structured interview, my questions were predetermined but open-ended (Ayres, 2008). More specifically, I prepared for the interviews by producing a list of quite detailed questions, divided into clusters which referred to each of the main topics that I intended to address during the interview which in turn, mirrored the research questions that I had previously formulated. During the actual interviews, I did not always respect the order of the questions, nor of the clusters. The sequence of questions was determined by the responses that I was receiving from my informants, responses that in some cases elicited questions I had not planned, sometimes referring to themes that I had not even considered in the preparatory-phase. At the same time, it did happen that some questions that I planned to ask were not posed, in most cases because while conducting the interview I realized they were irrelevant. In general, I tried to maintain, during the interviews, an open attitude, which allowed me to collect inputs and insights coming from my informants, both on themes that I did and that I did not previously intend to address. The definition of my questions was guided by the research questions that I had previously formulated, to tackle the themes that these research questions identified and summarized. Following the interview phase, though, and with the advancement of my research work, I have modified my research questions and the overall focus of my research. As a matter of fact, the interviews themselves had an important role in this, since they induced me to pay more attention to some aspects that I had not previously considered but which I realized being crucial.
I here present my informants, which I selected through a snowball sampling, meaning that the majority of them was referred to me by people that I initially either interviewed, or confronted with in relation to my research (Morgan, 2008). Five out of eight of my informants (M., B., S., A., and L.) were independent activists, meaning, people engaged in activities in favour of people on the move present in BiH, both in terms of humanitarian assistance, and in the form of political activism. These activists belong to an informal network, based mainly on social media, which does not have a defined structure and whose members operate in different ways and with different degrees of commitment. The second group of informants included two workers in a CSO dealing with reconciliation. They are referred to, in this work, as R. and N. Finally, the eighth informant, referred to as G., was an employee of one of the international organizations dealing with people on the move in BiH. The interviews were conducted and recorded after the informants had read and signed an informed consent briefly presenting my research, and where I stated their rights, including the guarantee of anonymity and the possibility of withdrawing from the research. In this thesis, to guarantee the protection of my informants’ identity, I avoid mentioning their potential affiliations to organizations, and I refer to them with dotted capital letters that do not correspond to the initial letters of their real names.

All my informants were locals, the majority of them was based in Sarajevo, while one person lived in a different city. It is important to specify that the informants that I selected can hardly be considered representative of the population at large. They all shared progressive views, and an open attitude towards migrants and refugee. Furthermore, they were all English speakers – the language that I used to conduct the interviews; the fact that I did not master the Bosnian language was for sure a limitation in my approaching to the situation, especially because it prevented me to include in the research informants with different views and different educational and socio-economic backgrounds. Because I was nevertheless interested in investigating ordinary people’s understandings of the situation, and their attitudes towards people on the move, I approached this theme through my informants’ perspective – always having in mind their particular attitude and their non-representativity of the society at large. As a matter of fact, my initial research questions, which guided the construction of my questions, mainly verted on this last aspect. But during my interviews, as I have previously explained, I remained open to new inputs on aspects that my participants found crucial. This approach to the interviews eventually led me to re-think some of my assumptions and to shift the focus of my research to include the wider picture, one taking into account the role of the EU and of the international organizations in creating and shaping the current situation in BiH. This brought me to the need to explore the secondary material. The collection and
analysis of this material were thus driven by a particular understanding of the situation as it was starting to take form in my mind, as I will better explain in the next section.

2.3. The Analysis of the Material

In order to analyse the interviews, I employed thematic analysis, as conceptualized by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first step consisted in transcribing the interviews, which I did in an accurate way, but at the same time without paying too much attention at unclear segments, and at paralinguistic aspects of the communication, since my approach to the interviews material entailed focusing on the contents delivered through the linguistic expression, rather than on the form through which they were delivered, which I was not interested in analysing. This decision was also informed by the fact that the language that I used to conduct the interviews was English, which was neither mine, nor my informants’ mother tongue. My informants and I, consequently, did not share a “pool of meanings” that would have allowed me to interpret their narratives at a deeper level. After having transcribed all the interviews, I started the coding process with the analysis software MAXQDA, which during and after the process allowed me to easily visualize excerpts from different interviews belonging to the same code. At the same time, after coding each interview, I took notes on a notebook of the most meaningful elements of an interview, which then facilitated the process of defining the themes. The following step consisted of creating meaningful themes by grouping the codes into the macro-categories. This process started during the coding phase, when the codes were constantly manipulated according to new segments added and divided into clusters. Finally, I concluded the thematic analysis of my interviews by organizing the themes into a structure of the chapters in which they are extensively discussed.

Even though I previously stated that through the interviews several themes that I have not previously thought of “emerged”, it is important to acknowledge, as Braun and Clarke (2006) point out, that the act of identifying themes and putting them in relation with each other is very much an active exercise, driven by the researcher’s own understanding and position. As they state, “an account of themes ‘emerging’ or being ‘discovered’ is a passive account of the process of analysis, and it denies the active role the researcher” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 80), that needs to be acknowledged and claimed. In this particular case, even though my interviewees actually provided me with crucial inputs on themes that I have not thought about during the preparatory phase of my research, I had an active role in the following identification of such themes, in the decision about their degree of importance, and in the act of putting them in relation with each other. Because of my
work as “weaver” of the resulting analysis, such analysis is undeniably shaped by my own understanding, positionality, and theoretical assumptions.

Following Braun and Clarke (2006) recommendation, I give here an account of the choices that I made in regard to how to approach and interact with the data from the interviews. First of all, I decided to opt for a wider analysis of the whole dataset, rather than a detailed analysis of a particular aspect. Secondly, the identification of themes was mainly inductive and data-driven, meaning that the identification of theories that could explain them was done in a secondary moment, and that the interviews themselves have been intentionally conducted in a “open” way, in order to let new insights and inputs flow in. Even though the elaboration of the interview questions was driven by my research questions and initial hypothesis – for instance, on the existence of empathy, among people in BiH, stemming from the own experience of war, and on the shared Islamic faith –, in some cases such assumptions were rendered less salient by newly-emerged themes. This being said, I cannot underestimate my own active role in carving such themes out of the corpus of the interviews, and in putting them in relation to each other. Thirdly, in analysing the interviews I opted for a semantic approach, meaning that I used my participants’ words without investigating or making assumptions on meanings lying “behind”, for the reasons explained above. However, in dealing with the responses that I got, I did assign importance to the positions from which they were uttered. In this regard, my approach can be considered essentialist, meaning that I assumed that what was being told to me was representative of the experience and positionality of the person in question. Of course, there is a constructivist element, in the sense that experiences and positionalities are socially produced, but for what concerns the linguistic expressions themselves, I assumed the existence of a more or less straightforward relationship between them and the experiences they referred to.

Finally, an explanation of how I dealt with my secondary material. Contrary to the way in which I approached the interviews, I worked with this material in a more top-down, hypothetical-deductive way, in the sense that the research, selection and analysis of this material was driven by assumptions and hypothesis that I have developed during the interview-phase and preliminary research. For example, the assumption that the EU approach towards irregular migration entails externalization of its management and control in third countries, guided the research of documents that could have supported this assumption.
3. Theoretical Framework: Multilevel Migration Governance

In this chapter I present theoretical concepts and formulations that are useful to understand the migration governance that is currently performed in BiH. I adopt elements of the theory on multilevel governance, which analyses how authority – in this case, over migration management – is being dispersed “away from central government – upwards to the supranational level, downwards to subnational jurisdictions, and sideways to public-private networks” (Panizzon & van Riemsdijk, 2019, p. 1226). This kind of multi-actor governance, in the context of BiH, is particularly conflictual. The EU, international organizations, state institutions, civil society and solidarity groups all seem to pursue different objectives, each with different degrees of power to affect the situation in accordance to their goals. As a matter of fact, besides being conflictual this migration governance is deeply asymmetrical, meaning that the actors that participate in it have different degrees of “authority” over its definition. Nevertheless, I decided to include all of them in a broad understanding of “governance” that includes actors active in it despite their level of power over it. This allows to take into account attempts to affect the situation “from below”.

In the first chapter I present the EU approach to irregular migration, in particular through the concepts of securitization (by which it is informed), externalization and multilevelling (through which it is implemented). The second chapter focuses instead on the potential and challenges of a governance from below, represented by civil society and solidarity groups.

3.1. The EU Approach to Migration: Securitization, Externalization and Multilevelling

In this chapter I address the EU migration policy concerning irregular migration, focusing on the concepts of securitization, externalization, and multilevelling of migration governance through partnership with international organizations. It might seem strange at a first glance, but in order to understand the current situation in BiH, it is necessary to begin with considering the approach towards irregular migration that the EU has developed in recent years, especially in its understanding as a matter of foreign policy to be dealt with “abroad” (Boswell, 2003).

BiH, during the winter 2017/18, had become the main entryway to the EU for migrants and refugees traveling along the Balkan Route. As such, the country, already an object of the EU enlargement and stabilization policy reform packages, together with other Western Balkans states, became object of the EU’s externalization and securitization approach, aimed at guaranteeing “security” to its member states, controlling the access of migrants and refugees into the Union.
3.1.1. Security and Threats

In order to make sense out of the current approach to migration of the EU, it is crucial to understand how irregular migration went from being a matter of “policy” to be a matter of “security” that needed to be addressed with “securitization” measures. Security, and the threats which endangers it, are described by Wæver (1996) as not objective matters, but as the results of a “speech act” (p. 107), “a specific way of framing an issue” (p. 106). In other words, something turns into a security issue not following a scientific evaluation of its dangerousness, but after having been called such by a securitizing actor and having this definition found the approval and legitimacy of a big enough audience (Wæver, 1996). The act of attaching the label “security issue” is called “securitization”, and implies the movement of the object from the field of policy to that of security (Faist, 2006), a movement that allows for the implementation of extraordinary measures in order to deal with it (Wæver, 1996). It is crucial, when looking at these processes, to investigate who the actors of securitization, and the beneficiaries of such discourses are (Choucri, 2002; Wæver, 1996), and why irregular migration is increasingly wanted to be portrayed as a matter of security (Faist, 2006).

The migration-security nexus, which is, “the connection between international migration, on the one hand, and human and state security, on the other hand” (Faist, 2006, p. 104), has long been established within the EU. The most recent example, at the time of writing this chapter, of how the securitization of migration allows for exceptional measures to be employed, has been the suspension of the right to seek for asylum decided by Greece in reaction to the decision of Turkey to open the borders to migrants and refugees (“Greece suspends asylum applications as migrants seek to leave Turkey," 2020, March 1). According to Faist (2006), the emergence and consolidation of this nexus has to be understood in the context of the post-Cold War. The end of the Cold War meant for the “Western world”, both the loss of a “powerful external threat to security”, and of an “important source of cohesion between the diverse groups which constitute the Western world” (Faist, 2006, pp. 106-107). This, in turn, contributed to the spread of objectless fears, from which the now-fragmented West started defending itself in a non-concerted and independent manner. Security started to be seen as “the collective management of sub- or transnational threats and the policing of borders and the internal realm, rather than just the defence of territory against external attack” (Faist, 2006, p. 107) and new security issues emerged: terrorism, drug trafficking, irregular migration, organized crime among the others (Faist, 2006). But the migration-security nexus is not explained by the existence of actual threats to security, Faist (2006) argues. The links that have been established between, for instance, terrorism, crime and migration, are quite inconclusive, but they are anyway present in the political discourse, accepted by the public, and even mirrored by
institutional connections within the EU (Faist, 2006). This, according to the author, is because migration has become a “meta-issue”, namely, an issue that has been connected to social problems and security concerns by a certain meta-politics, which focuses more on the symbolic meaning of policies and their reassuring capacity, than on their pertinence and effectiveness (Faist, 2006).

Immigrants have a long history of being conceived as a threat for the stability and homogeneity of the national community (Huysmans, 2000), but since the ‘70s and ‘80s, since the EU started dealing with migration on behalf of its member states, and especially after 9/11, the securitization discourse and the related measures aimed at restricting migration, have reached a new level (Faist, 2006; Huysmans, 2000). According to Huysmans (2000), the Europeanization of migration policy has contributed to the securitization of migration both directly, by including migration policy into the framework of internal security, and indirectly, by promoting a “negative politicization of immigrants” (Huysmans, 2000, p. 770) through various discourses. The author identifies three themes in relation to which the securitization of migration has developed in the EU. The first theme is that of internal security, which refers to the fear of member states of losing the capacity to implement border controls following the Schengen agreement, to be met by a strengthening of the common external border. Such security concern is the result of the establishment of a “security continuum connecting border control, terrorism, international crime and migration […] an institutionalized mode of policy-making that allows the transfer of the security connotations of terrorism, drugs-traffic and money-laundering to the area of migration” (Huysmans, 2000, p. 760). This continuum was established during the Schengen negotiations, that saw the participations of a “network of security professionals” (Huysmans, 2000, p. 761) that were given the power to define the security questions the new single market area would have had to deal with. The second theme identified by Huysmans (2000) is cultural security, which refers to the way in which the culturally and racially different immigrants threaten the perceived homogeneity of the national community. Finally, the third theme is that of the crisis of the welfare state, which is related to the depiction of the immigrant as a threat for the sustainability of the socio-economic system.

Wæver’s (1996) reasoning goes even further, to claim that securitization is at the very centre of the EU project to begin with. According to the author, the EU was built not by imitating the rhetoric of shared identity and heritage used by nation states, but by putting at the centre a security discourse, which presented the fragmented and violent past that the continent experienced as something to shy away from through the integration project. “Integration / fragmentation is not a question of how Europe will be, but whether Europe will be” (Wæver, 1996, p. 128). Integration is what needs to be defended, according to the security discourse which constitutes the bedrock of the EU, because the existence of the Union itself depends on it. If we look at the way in which the EU is dealing with
the current migratory flows from which it is trying to defend itself, one could argue that what seems threatening in such flows, more than cultural and ethnic differences, or the potential to affect the welfare state (Huysmans, 2000), is their potential to trigger the disintegration of the Union (or to bring it into light). Such fear has long come true. The member states, in recent years, have repeatedly failed to develop a common strategy, preferring instead a “strategic (non-)use of Europe” (Slominski & Trauner, 2018) and independent solutions to deal with the perceived threat represented by international migration. This understanding allows to make sense of the attempts, by the EU institutions, to promote a sentiment of unity in the Union: “This border is not only a Greek border but it is also a European border. And I stand here today as a European at your side” said the EC President von den Leyen on her visit to Greece during the recent developments at the border with Turkey (Jamieson, 2020, March 4). It also explains the efforts put in place in defence of the common external border, testified by the massive funds that the EU allocates to such purpose (Gifford, 2020, January 21), in the hope that shifting the focus towards the common external border would allow for a sense of sharing of space to grow among EU citizens, the idea of dwelling in a “fortress” to be defended from outside threats and to be unified within. Identity, and in this case the European identity that such discourses try to generate, is not “something given” (Wæver, 1996, p. 114) but it appears in the confrontation with the “other”. “Our identity” the author explains, “is not (only) threatened by the others, but also possible because of them, they are always already involved in our identity” (Wæver, 1996, p. 127). Migrants and refugees attempting to enter in the EU are thus labelled as a security threat, for a “Union” which has never reached the degree of integration that today would allow it to deal with the migrant situation in a united way, and secondly for a “people” that is becoming such only now, vis-à-vis those same migrants and refugees.

3.1.2. EU Borders and Externalization

In recent years, it has become clearer to the EU and its member states, that if they were to defend themselves from the threat represented by international migration, they needed to start operating beyond their own borders. As a consequence of the securitization of migration and of the criminalization of migrants, which generated the goal to curtail the influx of undesired migrants, Menjívar (2014) argues, borders have “expanded” both inwards and outwards, leading to an “omnipresence of borders” (p. 354) in wealthy countries. While interiorization of borders refers to the strengthening of controls within the country to expel the “irregulars”, exteriorization refers to the practice of moving border controls outside of the country. In this section, I focus on the externalization of border control and migration management by the EU to third countries.
In the EU, migration and asylum matters have increasingly come to be dealt with as an issue of external policy. This was due in part to the loss of national control over the member states’ borders following the establishment of the Schengen area. The common external border needed to be reinforced in order to “compensate for their [the member states] increased vulnerability to irregular entries” (Boswell, 2003, p. 622). But in order to limit movements of people in the EU, it was necessary to collaborate with third countries, from which people on the move were coming from, or through which they were transiting (Boswell, 2003). Boswell (2003) identifies two ways in this has been done: 1) externalization of migration control to third countries, and 2) prevention of migration. The first way includes, in turn, 1a) exportation of classic instruments of migration control (border control, migration management, capacity building of asylum systems, etc.), and 1b) readmission agreements with sending countries. Such deployment of forces and resources – which reached a new level during and after the refugee crisis in 2015/16 – could not have been possible without “a populist element” (Boswell, 2003, p. 623), the conceptualization of migration as a security issue, which made migration gaining more and more salience, and led to the legitimization of any measure taken to curb it. The second kind of measures, on the other hand, prescribes to address the root causes of migration, with the goal to “offer potential migrants and refugees a real possibility of staying in their place of origin” (Boswell, 2003, p. 625).

The second strategy can be also seen as an attempt to establish a migration-development nexus, to replace the migration-security nexus dominating the EU approach to migration. Such alternative approach is based on the belief that international migration has the potential to benefit both receiving and sending countries, and that for the latter it can be a “tool” for development (Lavenex & Kunz, 2008). Which would eventually remove the factors that push migrants to leave their countries of origin (Boswell, 2003). As Boswell (2003) explains, such attempts started emerging in the late 1990s, with the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam and the 1999 Tampere Conclusions, which acknowledged the need for a “comprehensive approach to migration addressing political, human rights and development issues in countries and regions of origin and transit” (European Parliament, 1999). Such rhetoric shift has not been combined, though, with concrete measures in the same direction. As Lavenex and Kunz (2008) claim, “the main focus of recent initiatives is still on the aspect of immigration control and proposals for measures pertinent for development remain not only very vague but also non-committal and discretionary” (pp. 452-453). Moreover, even where such initiatives do exist, “the nexus tends to emphasize the priorities of receiving countries” (Lavenex & Kunz, 2008, p. 454) instead of equally benefitting both contracting parties. This excerpt from a document of the EC concerning readmission agreements summarizes this concept:
As readmission agreements are solely in the interest of the Community, their successful conclusion depends very much of the ‘leverage’ at the Commission's disposal. In that context it is important to note that, in the field of JHA [Justice and Home Affairs], there is little that can be offered in return (European Commission, 2002, p. 23).

The failure to establish a migration-development nexus, means that externalization and security-driven measures are today the prevailing means through which the EU deals with migratory flows. But how is the cooperation between the EU and the third countries to which it outsources migration management, established and performed? To understand how externalization works, Lavenex and Schimmelfennig (2009) propose to adopt a governance, rather than a foreign policy perspective, since while the latter refers to countries and regions, the former focuses of systems of rules and on how such systems are being extended beyond the formal Union membership. The authors identify three modes in which external governance can be carried out, namely, hierarchical, network and market mode. Hierarchical governance presupposes an asymmetrical relationship between the “exporter” of policies and the target country and is dedicated to producing binding prescriptions for the partner in the position of subordination. The network mode of governance, instead, happens between actors who are, at least formally, equal, and implies participatory elements in the definition of agreements that are usually less constraining. In the case of the EU, the externalization of its migration policies to third countries happens through both these strategies. Even though third countries are formally independent vis-à-vis the EU, often what is presented as network governance among equals, is a form of authoritarian imposition of norms by the EU. According to the power-based explanation (Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2009) this kind of relationship takes place when third countries are “both strongly dependent on the EU and more strongly dependent on the EU than on alternative governance providers” (p. 803). It depends, in summary, on the bargaining power of the EU and on the degree in which it is in the position to demand (Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2009). Such power is very high in the case of countries which have started accession negotiations with the EU, or to which annexation has been promised, as in the case of the WB countries.

As previously mentioned, Boswell (2003) identifies two modes in which externalization of migration policy occurs: expansion of border controls, and readmission agreements. The latter is implemented in cooperation with sending countries – the most concrete example of which are the nine Mobility Partnerships – while former concerns transit countries. The engagement with transit countries is crucial for the EU, since it allows to deal with people that want to enter in the Union, without them being on its soil (Menjívar, 2014). Such engagement, which entails enhancement of border controls through training of personnel, and the delivery of technical and financial assistance, can be done in exchange for concessions on trade and development assistance but overall, the third
countries’ compliance with the EU can be explained with an imbalance of power between the two (Menjívar, 2014). The externalizing moves of the EU are based on power asymmetries that they in turn contribute to reinforce. As Kunz, Lavenex and Panizzon (2011) claim, the ‘rhetoric of ‘partnership’ helps to mask the profound asymmetry of interaction between the receiving and the sending and transit countries [...] this discourse suggests a commonality between ‘north’ and ‘south’ that masks and reproduces deep underlying antagonisms” (p. 17).

The only actor benefitting from such externalization is the EU which manages, at once, to outsource the burden of migration management and the guilt attached to the practices that it might entail. For the EU outsourcing such practices does not lead to saving resources, rather the opposite. It might be all a matter of keeping racialized bodies outside the European space, bodies that need to be dealt with “out of sight”. Measures aimed at curbing migration entail violence, but as long as it can be attributed to people that are in turn racialized – like the “violent” and “backward” Balkan man – it can be oversight and accepted. The third countries that engage in such “partnerships” and accept – more or less forcibly – to do the EU’s “dirty job” have very little in return for their effort. Such countries are often ill-equipped to deal with the burden that has been unloaded on them, and having to deal with such burden might worsen instability and their socio-economic situation (Lavenex, 2016). Furthermore, because powerful actors like the EU prefer the tool of bilateral agreements in dealing with third countries, it is impossible for the former to constitute alliances that might allow them to have a greater bargaining power vis-à-vis the EU (Kunz et al., 2011).

In recent years the EU’s bargaining power, once connected to enlargement, has diminished with the salience of enlargement itself (Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2009). In the next section, I show how it tries to recover it through the collaboration with non-state actors like international organizations.

3.1.3. Multilevel Migration Governance and the Role of International Organizations

The externalization process that the EU is pursuing in order to deal with migratory flows has led to a new form of governance of migration and to a reshaping of “traditional linkages between governments, international organizations, and regional integration actors” (Panizzon & van Riemsdijk, 2019). Such kind of governance can be defined “multilevel”, meaning that the authority over the matter has been moved away from the central government, towards supranational and subnational actors (Panizzon & van Riemsdijk, 2019). Panizzon and van Riemsdijk (2019) refer to the current governance of migration as a case of Type II multilevel governance, a condition in which different jurisdictions operate across levels, their activities often overlapping. The power relations and responsibilities concerning the management of migratory flows, in this type of
governance, are “blurred” (Panizzon & van Riemsdijk, 2019), and with them accountability, as I explain further down. Despite the growing hopes for the development of a global governance of migration during the last two decades (Kunz et al., 2011; Thouez, 2019), it is more and more clear, the authors claim, that we are moving towards a multilevel, rather than a global governance of migration (Panizzon & van Riemsdijk, 2019).

In this picture, a crucial role is played by international organizations, which have come to occupy a relevant seat at the table of the multilevel governance of migration. International organizations, and in particular IOM and UNHCR, have been increasingly involved in the EU’s and its member states’ migration-related plans, aimed at the “control of migrants and their systematic removal from Europe’s southern borders” (Brachet, 2016, p. 274), especially as facilitators of the relations between the former and the third countries they have to cooperate with. The collaboration between UNHCR and the EU was formalized with the Strategic Partnership Agreement signed in 2005, which enhances the cooperation between the two actors for the protection of refugees, and for the promotion of international norms and treaties in third countries (Colville, 2005). Even IOM has developed a formal cooperation with the EU, ratified by a number of agreements signed from 1994 on – most importantly, the Strategic Cooperation Framework signed in 2012 – and that “has increased substantially” (IOM, n.d.-b) since 2015. In 2016, the Framework was extended to include the Directorate General for Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (IOM, 2016), a clear sign of the shift of focus towards non-EU countries to deal with irregular migration.

Concerning funding, the EU and its member states pride themselves to be among the largest sponsors of IOM, having contributed with 890 million Euros in the period 2015-2016 (IOM, 2016). In the same period, 41 percent of projects carried out within the EU by IOM concerned “return and reintegration” of migrants, while 48 percent of projects implemented in South-Eastern and Eastern Europe fell into the category “migration management” (IOM, 2016). IOM has been also engaged by the EU in the development and implementation of the Mobility Partnerships that the EU has signed with a number of third countries to initiate “a responsible joint management of migratory flows” (European Commission, 2008, June 5; Potaux, 2011). In 2016, IOM became a UN agency, signifying a growing involvement of the UN in the field of international migration, and also a trend towards considering migration and refugee policy jointly (Thouez, 2019).

Lavenex (2016) explains the engagement of international organizations by the EU, as a strategy to fill the capabilities-expectations gap hindering the compliance of third countries with the EU plans. Such gap is due to lack of capacity and legitimacy of the EU in its bargaining process with third countries, which are less interested in securing borders and stopping migration. International organizations provide the EU with both “administrative capacity” and “normative legitimacy”
(Lavenex, 2016, p. 556), the latter given by the organizations’ mandates tied to international laws and treaties. On the other hand, from such collaboration, the international organizations gain support, especially financial (Lavenex, 2016). The role these international organizations come to play, in relation with the EU or the member states they are cooperating with, depends on their authority and autonomy (Lavenex, 2016). Authority, which in turn leads to autonomy, is based on having a clear mandate. Lavenex (2016) argues that while this applies to UNHCR, whose mandate is tied to the 1951 Geneva Convention, the same cannot be said for IOM, which in addition depends heavily on external funds, and can be thus regarded as a “service organization” (Lavenex, 2016, p. 558). Lack of authority and autonomy translates in the impossibility to act as a “counterweight” to the EU’s goals and activities, but rather as a “subcontractor”, tasked with implementing the EU’s migration policy, or as a “transmitter” of EU rules in third countries, disguised as international norms (Lavenex, 2016).

All of this can be seen in action in different contexts, including BiH, as I better show in the fifth chapter. Another country in which the partnership between the EU and international organizations, in particular IOM, has been crucial for the EU’s goal of curbing migratory flows, is Libya, as showed by Brachet (2016). According to the author, IOM’s activity in Libya before, during, and after the 2011 war had a “performative nature” (Brachet, 2016, p. 281), meaning that the organization managed, through adopting a humanitarian rhetoric, to portray itself as a humanitarian actor, while in reality implementing the EU’s – one if its major funders – migration policy. Among IOM’s activities in the region, there were the promotion of campaigns to dissuade people from migrating, the management of border and migration control, and programs of assisted voluntary return: projects which are “generally more for the benefit of its state sponsors than for migrants themselves” (Brachet, 2016, p. 279).

Overall, there are several problems connected to the involvement of international organizations in the governance of migration. First of all, such organizations cannot be held accountable, contrary to state-actors, and can thus pursue their activities without having to answer to the public opinion (Brachet, 2016). Secondly, by subcontracting the implementation of migration policies to international organizations, the EU and its member states manage to escape accountability for activities that they are, in reality, coordinating and from which they benefit (Brachet, 2016). Thirdly, the international organizations operating on behalf of their sponsors, contribute to expanding the EU’s control and authority to states and regions beyond its borders, legitimized to do so by the humanitarian and crisis management discourses they promote. Finally, these international organizations are given the power to influence policy-making by “spelling out the terms of the debate” (Brachet, 2016, p. 275), and by shaping the categories through which people and
movements are understood. They are contributing to shaping a global understanding of migration and of how it should be managed, “a globally homogeneous governmentality of borders and international migration” (Brachet, 2016, p. 277).

To summarize, international organizations like IOM, despite the label “international” and the presumed independency and commitment to serving their target populations are, in reality, partners of the states and unions that can afford to fund them. Through cooperating with them, wealthy states can pursue their interests in the field of migration without being held accountable, and with an increased legitimacy given by the mandates of the organizations. Their engagement in the new multilevel governance of migration is thus not a guarantee of the safeguard of vulnerable people, but rather a subtle way for powerful nations to pursue their own agenda of migration control.

3.2. Migration Governance from Below?

In the two sections that compose this chapter, I provide some conceptualizations referring to the potential and challenges that civil society and solidarity groups have and face in the multilevel governance of migration that comes to include them as actors. It could be debated whether their involvement in the situation can be defined as “governance”, because of the low level of authority they are accorded. In an understanding of governance as asymmetrical (Likić-Brborić & Schierup, 2015), though, civil society and solidarity groups can said to be part of it, even when operating in it as simple service-providers, without any decision-making power. By inserting them in this framework, I attempt to investigate their inter-relation with the other and more powerful actors involved, and their potential to affect the situation regardless their position.

3.2.1. Civil Society

Besides the upward direction in which multilevel governance of migration develops – with extension of authority from the national, to the supranational level – there is also a downward direction in which this happens, with the involvement of regional and local authorities, and of civil society (Panizzon & van Riemsdijk, 2019).

As Rother and Steinhilper (2019) argue, migration governance was for a long time conceived as being prerogative of the state, while multilevel approaches are quite recent, as well as only recently have been created opportunities to include civil society actors to mobilize for refugee rights. According to Panizzon and van Riemsdijk (2019), following the refugee crisis “local networks” have gained a more prominent role, having started engaging in the previously discussed type II multilevel migration governance by interacting not only horizontally with similar local actors, but
also vertically with global institutions. When Panizzon and van Riemsdijk (2019) talk about “governance from below” and “localism”, though, they refer to local administrations and authorities, while Rother and Steinhilper (2019) argue that “bottom-up must take into consideration those most directly affected by the policies it brings about: the migrants and refugees themselves and/or the organizations who represent them” (p. 245).

Banulescu-Bogdan (2011) identifies several ways in which CSOs work in the field of migration. These are: service provision, advocacy, policy formulation, implementation and monitoring of government policies, and umbrella organizations uniting different NGOs to gain a stronger collective voice. When it comes to the EU, despite recognizing the importance of engaging with civil society – “crucial link between governments and the communities they represent” (Banulescu-Bogdan, 2011, p. 1) especially in third countries where it wants to implement its migration policy, such engagement has been, so far, very poor, especially in terms of civil society being given an opportunity to affect the policy debate (Banulescu-Bogdan, 2011). This is particularly true for small, local, financially dependent civil society, which might be employed simply as “service providers”, by directing them task-binding financial resources which simultaneously keep civil society away from the decision table, and legitimize the engagement of the donor – in this case, the EU – in the country in question. In the understanding of “governance” adopted in this thesis, being involved in multilevel governance, in this case of migration, does not mean having authority over the matter. It might very well mean being involved as assignees of specific tasks, or being consulted only pro forma – “to check off a box that civil society was represented” (Banulescu-Bogdan, 2011, p. 1) –, without such involvement meaning the possibility to affect the system in place. Multilevel governance, in fact, does not imply equality between the stakeholders involved – as global governance, it is deeply “asymmetrical” (Likić-Brborić & Schierup, 2015).

In the Balkan region, among other locations, the refugee crisis has mobilized solidarity movements across transit and receiving states to engage for the rights of the people of the move. This engagement addressed the failure of governments to support and protect the refugees and migrants in a humane way (Della Porta, 2018) – but also, as testified by my informants, the lack of a meaningful engagement of formal CSOs. According to Della Porta (2018) this is not only the issue of solidarity, but also a joint act of citizenship engaging migrants and activists along the migrant routes. The next section provides some theoretical conceptualizations useful to understand the positioning of such informal, independent groups.
3.2.2. Solidarity Groups

Governance from below comes also from groups of self-defined “independent” volunteers and activists, who engage in various activities for the benefit of people on the move often in a non-formal and non-organized way. In this section, I present the concepts of political altruism (Milan & Pirro, 2018; Passy, 2001) and political solidarity (Scholz, 2008), which are useful to understand this kind of grass-root mobilization for people on the move. These two concepts provide an account of the motivations that sustain such involvement, and of the ways in which it is performed.

The engagement of ordinary people for the benefit of people on the move can be explained with the concept of political altruism, as elaborated by Passy (2001). Altruism consists in actions that do not benefit directly the person performing them; when these actions are inserted in social movements, mobilizations in defence of the rights, interests, and identities of others, they come to be referred to as acts of political altruism (Passy, 2001). Besides having an altruistic orientation, these acts must be performed collectively and, most importantly, must have a political goal of social change, argues Passy (2001). The importance of having a political goal, is what differentiates political altruism from other humanitarian activities aimed at helping the disadvantaged, but that do not engage in a political conflict (Passy, 2001). These are rather “acts of compassion’, which, most of the times, are a palliative to the lack of state intervention” (Passy, 2001, p. 8). Further in the discussion, Passy (2001) points out to a paradox that she defines “cultural”, entailed in political altruism. That is, solidarity movements originated in the “West”, where values like independency, self-interest, and individualism are accorded great importance. Considering this, she argues, either political altruism is a cultural paradox, or it is not truly altruism, but rather “a channel of self-expression” which “help[s] people to ‘feel better’” (Passy, 2001, p. 19). According to this conceptualization, altruism entails a clear-cut distinction between the performer and the beneficiary of the act of altruism, because the action is directed outside the self, as long as the benefits coming with it.

It is different in the case of political solidarity, defined by Scholz (2008) as a situation in which “individuals make a conscious commitment to join with others in struggle to challenge a perceived injustice” (p. 34). More specifically, it is a “moral relation of a social movement that unites individuals because of their shared commitment to a cause” (Scholz, 2008, p. 72). Contrary to political altruism, political solidarity does not entail a clear distinction between those who suffer oppression, and those who act in solidarity with them. As Scholz (2008) explains:

Individuals who are not oppressed or do not suffer from injustice can and do join in political solidarity.
So too not all peoples who suffer from a particular form of oppression or face a particular injustice
will join in efforts to respond to it. Some may deny that they suffer from oppression or injustice, and some may be too weakened by the oppression to fight back. (p. 57)

“Political solidarity”, states Scholz (2008), “rests on a commitment and not on the experience of oppression” (p. 57). It is the recognition of the injustice and the commitment to achieve social justice, what unites a group which members might not even know each other, might join the movement for different reasons, and perform their action in different ways (Scholz, 2008). Since people might join the struggle from many different positions – as people who directly suffer from the oppression in question, or as people who just witness such oppression – what unites them is not a shared consciousness based on similarity of experiences, but rather the commitment to counter the injustice (Scholz, 2008). As Scholz (2008) puts it: “the idea is to seek understanding in our mutuality rather than mutuality in our understanding” (p. 187), meaning that it is the fact of coming together to take a stand against a certain injustice, what unites those who join – opposite to social solidarity, in which action is tied to the fact of belonging to a certain social group (Scholz, 2008).

As for political altruism, the commitment to social change is crucial for the definition of political solidarity, change that is accomplished through social activism and advocacy (Scholz, 2008).

A common fight requires mutuality between fellow participants in the struggle, which in turn entails equality (Scholz, 2008) – even more, in a struggle against social injustice which entails according different worth, rights and dignity to different people. In this case, it is crucial to dismantle this hierarchical system first of all within the solidarity movement itself. This is impossible in the case of political altruism, which positions the actors and the beneficiaries on two different levels – of which, one standing above the other – but crucial in the case of solidarity. As Scholz (2008) explains, “charity is usually one-sided, but mutuality assumes participants in solidarity are ‘working with’ rather than ‘working for’ those who suffer injustice or oppression” (p. 93). According to the author, the “privileged”, meaning, a person not suffering from the oppression that is countered by the social movement, has a crucial role in the movement. While the oppressed might be “epistemologically privileged”, meaning that his or her experience of oppression consents a privileged perspective on the oppressive system, nevertheless the inclusion of the “socially privileged” is crucial for the achievement of the goal. In Scholz (2008) words, “real social change […] has to embrace, dialogue with, seek alliance with those very people who support (consciously or temporarily unconsciously) unjust or oppressive thoughts, practices, and social structures” (p. 162). In order to enter in true solidarity, though, it is fundamental that once the socially privileged has acquired consciousness of his or her position in the system, they renounce to both the social, and the epistemological privilege connected to that position (Scholz, 2008).
4. Bosnia and Herzegovina: From Emigration State to a Hotspot in the Balkan Route

Despite being geographically central, BiH became part of the Balkan route only recently, when growing numbers of migrants and refugees started transiting in the country on their way to the EU during the winter 2017/18. In order to understand the situation that concerns BiH today, it is necessary to look at the context that led to the country turning into a migrant hotspot – the Balkan route and the refugee crisis – but also at BiH itself, a country of emigration which the current events are bringing into light the dysfunctionality and fragmentation. During the so-called refugee crisis of 2015/16 Europe’s attention shifted from the Mediterranean to the Balkans, which had become the main entry-way of migrants and refugees into the EU (Župarić-Ilić & Valenta, 2019). The Balkan route(s) are the ways stretching across the Balkan peninsula that people on the move travel on their journey from the southern EU border all the way to Croatia and Hungary, gateways into Western Europe. In 2015 alone, a number of people ranging from 600,000 to one million or more (Šantić, Minca, & Umek, 2017), travelled these routes to eventually reach the EU. Mainly from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, they were fleeing wars in their respective countries (Weber, 2017).

In this chapter I first provide a short background on BiH as a post-war society and emigration country, followed by the evolvement of the Balkan route during the refugee crisis, and finally BiH becoming a migrant hotspot.

4.1. Post-War BiH, EU Enlargement and Migrations

In this section, I map the context of BiH in a historical perspective, focusing on the elements which are relevant to understand the response that the state, its political class, its civil society, and its citizens provided to the emerging situation.

4.1.1. Post-War Reconstruction

Following the 1992-1995 war, the reconstruction in BiH was shaped by the Dayton Peace Agreement, signed in November 1995 by the representatives of the three conflicting parts under the mediation of the US-led international community. In this chapter, I focus first of all on the role that the international community had in supervising the peace, which paved the way for the progressive engagement of the EU in BiH; secondly, on the establishment of a political system based on ethnopolitics, which is at the basis of the country’s social, political and administrative fragmentation.
The international community had a crucial role in the establishment and maintenance of the peace and social reconstruction in BiH. After the signing of the peace, in fact, it carved out a role for itself in the reconstruction of the state, a role embodied by the figure of the High Representative. The international involvement in the transition towards security and democracy, also supported by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), was initially supposed to last for one year, to supervise the elections and the establishment of the state institutions, but in 1997 the mandate was extended indefinitely, leading to a “US-run international protectorate in Bosnia” (Chandler, 1999, p. 127). Even today, the High Representative maintains a great deal of power (OHR, n.d.), in contradiction with the claimed goal to guide BiH towards autonomy (Chandler, 1999). Instead, the international community neglected the construction of state institutions and left local actors out of the legislative processes, carrying out a “democratization without democracy” (Likić-Brborić, 2009, p. 63). Far from unifying the state (Chandler, 1999), this approach pushed BiH in quite the opposite direction, “engender[ing] political apathy and ‘anti-politics’” in the population, and “a continuation of identity politics and reliance on the ‘primary consensus’ of ethnicity-based loyalties” (Likić-Brborić, 2009, p. 63).

But the seeds of this persistent fragmentation along ethnic lines, lie in the agreement itself, which formalized the geographic and ethnic division of the country resulting from the military operations carried out during the war, by establishing the two ethnically homogeneous entities in which BiH is divided (Haider, 2009), the Republika Srpska (RS), largely populated by Bosnian Serbs, and the Federacija Bosne i Hercegovine (FBiH), by Bosniaks and Croats. Furthermore, the agreement, with the intent to guarantee representativity, set up an electoral system that divided the electorate of BiH into three constituencies reflecting the three main ethnic groups, thus forcing ethnic labels onto the citizens as they perform their political rights. Nationalistic parties are those benefitting from this system, which makes the whole political game ethnicity-centred. As Belloni (2001) points out, “by fostering community isolation, mobilization, and a general feeling of insecurity, ethnic elites legitimate each other and maintain a tight grip on their constituencies” (p. 173). Change is hard to achieve, since those who should work for it are in that position of power thanks to the relevance that those same divisions have in the political system.

That presented briefly presented in this section, is the system at the basis of the social, political, administrative and territorial fragmentation of BiH, that the current situation has brought more vividly into light. This fragmentation, besides impeding BiH to provide an adequate response to the needs of people on the move – to a great extent, because of the lack of cooperation between state, entities and local institutions, has also clashed with the EU expectations that BiH could handle the management of irregular migrants on its behalf.
4.1.2. Civil Society in the Context of BiH

Civil society came to have a crucial role in post-war BiH and in the reconstruction of the state. According to Likić-Brborić (2009) this is tied to the neoliberal approach which inspired the definition and implementation of the peace in BiH, and which in particular “renounced the support for social policies in development processes, while assigning social solidarity to individual civic responsibility and civil society initiatives” (p. 58). Furthermore, CSOs were seen by the international community as a crucial actor in the democratization and reconciliation process, “sources of bottom-up or mid-level peacebuilding” (Lidén, Mikhelidze, Stavrevska, & Vogel, 2016, p. 274). As explained by Lidén et al. (2016), according to the liberal peace perspective, civil society was supposed to prepare the ground for the development of a liberal and democratic state, favouring the establishment of a peaceful society. The authors, though, confront this perspective with Chandler’s idea of “hollow democracy”, according to which the efforts towards developing civil society conducted away from democracy. Such efforts, in fact, guaranteed foreign regulation – since civil society is sustained by foreign donors – while bringing politics out of the political sphere, in a process not sustained by popular legitimacy (Chandler, 2009, as cited in Lidén et al., 2016).

Several issues emerge from this partnership between the international community and civil society in BiH, which undermine the potential of civil society to shape both the governance of post-war democratization, and today’s migration governance. Along with the support that civil society receives from the international community, comes also a strong financial dependency from it, mirrored by the impossibility to act independently (Belloni, 2001; Lidén et al., 2016). Foreign donors, in fact, impose on civil society modes and timeframes of action, preventing the development of “genuine political and social participation” (Belloni, 2001, p. 173). The EU is, even today, a strong supporter of civil society in BiH (Delegation of the EU to BiH & EUSR in BiH, n.d.-a). This entails, that the latter’s engagement in the current situation is shaped by the funding it receives, that in turn might be tied to specific modes of actions in line with the EU’s interests.

Furthermore, Belloni (2001) points to the lack of legitimacy that externally-funded civil society has within the local society. In BiH, civil society is felt distant by ordinary people, who consider it as an enterprise pursuing its own profit or making its donors’ interests, as revealed by a recent survey (MEASURE-BiH, 2019). The citizens of BiH see themselves neither beneficiaries of its projects nor direct contributors to social change in their communities since the whole process is externally-designed and externally-led (Belloni, 2001). As Lidén et al. (2016) summarize:

The local population does not regard CSOs as independent, but associates them with the political elites, parties or donors, thus perceiving civil society as externally driven. This has particular
implications for the CSOs–society nexus and the legitimacy of CSOs. While a permanent alliance between the EU and the CSOs has been created, this partnership is primarily driven by mutual self-interests: the EU is pragmatically seeking political influence and the CSOs pursue funding and international legitimacy that will ensure their continuous functioning. (p. 292)

Despite these considerations have been formulated in relation to the role that civil society was assigned in the reconciliation process, they are appropriate even today, to understand the role civil society has in the current situation concerning people on the move.

4.1.3. BiH and the EU

In recent years, the international community has pushed for the EU to enhance its presence in BiH. In this section, I explain how the agreements which tie the EU and BiH, paved the way for the implementation of the EU externalization approach to curb irregular migration in BiH. Currently, the EU is present in BiH with two institutions: the EU delegation to BiH / EU Special Representative in BiH, and the EUFOR/Althea Mission, a military deployment that replaced the NATO SFOR-operation in 2004. Overall, the declared mission of the EU in the Balkan country is to “support and embed a stable and viable Bosnia and Herzegovina co-operating peacefully with its neighbours and irreversibly on track towards EU membership” (Delegation of the EU to BiH & EUSR in BiH, n.d.-b). In 2003, during the Thessaloniki European Council summit, the EU committed to the progressive inclusion of all the Balkan countries, stating that “the future of the Balkans is within the European Union” (European Commission, 2003, June 21). Having applied for accession in 2016, BiH figures as “potential candidate”, meaning that it will be accorded the status of “candidate country” as soon as it will have conformed its legislation to the EU’s acquis, in particular concerning political stabilization, the development of a market economy, and regional cooperation (European Commission, n.d.). In 2015, BiH and the EU signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA), an instrument that compels BiH to take steps towards making its legislation compatible with EU standards. Progresses in the fulfilment of the commitments stated in the Agreement are evaluated each year by the EU.

The EU has thus been long active in BiH. The promise of membership has a crucial role in enhancing the bargaining power of the EU, because it allows it to exercise conditionality on the Balkan country, “a top-down policy transfer on the basis of external incentives” (Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2009, p. 797). In this case, the incentive is the EU membership, for which BiH pays the price of being a site where migration control is enforced on behalf of the Union. Such exchange was formalized in the SAA (2015), as can be read in some of its articles:
Bosnia and Herzegovina commits itself to the development of projects of common interest, notably those related to combating organised crime, corruption, money laundering, illegal migration and trafficking (Art. 6).

The Parties shall cooperate in the areas of visa, border control, asylum and migration […]. Cooperation in the above matters […] should include technical and administrative assistance for: a) the exchange of information on legislation and practices; b) the drafting of legislation; c) enhancing the efficiency of the institutions; d) the training of staff; e) the security of travel documents and detection of false documents; f) border management. (Art. 80).

The Parties shall cooperate in order to prevent and control illegal immigration. To this end Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Member States shall readmit any of their nationals illegally present on their territories and the Parties also agree to conclude and fully implement an Agreement on readmission, including an obligation for the readmission of nationals of other countries and stateless persons. (Art. 81).

The SAA paved the way for turning BiH into a buffer zone where people on the move directed towards the EU could be blocked before reaching it. In the Action Plan on Migration and Asylum elaborated in 2016, BiH acknowledged that with the signing of the SAA, it had “assumed greater responsibility with regard to the control of legal and illegal migrations” (Bosnia and Herzegovina Ministry of Security, 2016, pp. 14-15). The word “agreement” might suggest a condition of equality between contracting parties, but the governance that the EU performs in BiH is purely hierarchical (Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2009), given the power asymmetry existent between the two, which the current situation is again reinforcing.

4.1.4. BiH as an Emigration State

In 2018, when 24,000 people on the move entered BiH (UNCT BiH, 2019a), the Balkan country experienced for the first time a movement of people opposite of that which it has been producing for years. An inward migration in a country which citizens move abroad each year by the thousand. BiH went from being a country of emigration, to a transit country, to a migrant hotspot.

Emigration is seen by many citizens of BiH, and by the youth in particular, as the only option to improve one’s living conditions. According to a recent survey conducted by USAID, 50 percent of the youth interviewed declared to be considering leaving the country. The main reason to leave BiH is identified in the impossibility to find a job, unemployment being be main concern for 54 percent of the youth interviewed (MEASURE-BiH, 2019). As reported by the Ministry of Security (2018),
in 2017 4,270 people withdrew permanent residence in BiH, a data that is likely to be lower than the actual number of people that emigrated, since they might emigrate but preserve their BiH residency. According to the same report, approximately half of the population of BiH belongs to the Bosnian Diaspora (Bosnia and Herzegovina Ministry of Security, 2018).

These data show well the effects that the implementation of the strategy for the economic reconstruction of BiH in the post-war period had. As explained by Likić-Brborić (2009), this strategy involved neoliberal macro-economic policy reforms – monetary reform and institution of a Central Bank, development of the financial sector through financial liberalisation, facilitation of foreign investments – which left the state out of the economic reconstruction process. The outcome, was a “privatisation process that has failed to generate economic growth, industrial revival and employment, while engendering an informal economy and corruption” (Likić-Brborić, 2009, p. 65). Social policies were completely forgotten in the process, at the most outsourced to parallel structures such local and international NGOs, in a “conceptualization of social reconstruction without social policies” (Likić-Brborić, 2009, p. 67). Overall, Likić-Brborić (2009) adds:

> International efforts to implement a set of radical and uniform economic reforms, including liberalisation, macroeconomic stabilisation and privatisation, without appropriate social policies, on the one hand, and constructing the instrumental state contrasting to actual ethnic identities on the other hand, have precluded social embeddedness of formal market institutions. (p. 66)

This is the background of today’s economic situation in BiH, which figures among the worst countries worldwide for its unemployment rate – 20.8 percent of the population in 2018 (UNDP, 2019a), and in particular for youth unemployment, which was estimated to concern 46.7 percent of the youth in 2018 (UNDP, 2019b).

4.2. The Evolvement of the Balkan Route in Recent Years

The Balkan route, according to Beznec et al. (2016), “is not a new phenomenon. It has a long history, marked by successive transformations in scope and visibility” (p. 4). Before 2013, the Balkan route was marginal among the routes used by people to reach the EU (Weber, 2016). During 2013 and 2014, the number of “irregular crossings” registered along the route started rising (Frontex, 2015) but at that time, half of the people involved were WB citizens, especially from Kosovo (Weber, 2016).

The refugee crisis, for how it is commonly understood, started in 2015, with thousands of arrivals of people in Greece from Turkey, that then continued their journey along the Balkan peninsula. In the first years of the refugee crisis, the route mainly went from Turkey to Greece (and to a lesser extent
Bulgaria, which in 2014 started building a fence along the border with Turkey), and then through North Macedonia and Serbia to Hungary, and then to Croatia and Slovenia (Weber, 2017). From the beginning of 2015 and for around one year, the Balkan route turned into a “formalized corridor” (Beznec et al., 2016), that migrants could cross facilitated by the governments of the Balkan countries in just a few days, without relying on smuggling networks (Beznec et al., 2016). The corridor was officially closed in 2016, a closure symbolized by the EU-Turkey deal, and by the fence built on Hungary’s southern border. Despite the intentions, the closure was never complete, but it resulted in thousands of people being entrapped especially in Serbia.


4.2.1. The “Formalized Corridor” (2015)

At the beginning of the crisis, the route undertaken by people on the move on their way to the EU concerned for the most part Greece, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Hungary. During this phase, North Macedonia and Serbia decided to stop “serving as ‘buffer-zones’ for the rest of the core EU countries […] and defined themselves as transit countries” (Župarić-Iljić & Valenta, 2019, p. 371), generating that which Beznec et al. (2016) call a “formalized corridor”. These countries first tolerated, then facilitated the passage of people on the move, with the goal of moving the burden to the next country. Both North Macedonia and Serbia, the first in April and the second in July 2015, introduced a 72 hours transit permit, that in theory was meant for people who declared their intention to seek asylum to formalize their claim, but which in practice allowed people to
transit legally across the two countries (Beznec et al., 2016). Furthermore, both countries set up a transportation service for migrants and refugees to facilitate their transit (Beznec et al., 2016). “This tolerated and overtly secured transit – Župarić-Ilić and Valenta (2019) argue – “has reduced the sufferings of migrants along the Balkan corridor. It also lowered the human and economic costs of migration, but increased the pressure on the destination countries in the Western Europe” (p. 372). The EU, in fact, was in the meantime struggling to handle the numerous arrivals, and to develop a common strategy entailing redistributions and burden-sharing in the management of the situation. Ironically, Weber (2017) notes, while the response of the Balkan countries was becoming increasingly “Europeanized”, that of the EU was becoming more and more “Balkanized”, to eventually end up in “total disintegration” (p. 7). During the autumn of 2015, a coalition of states willing to take in refugees, led by Germany, started proposing redistribution plans, that were though opposed by that which came to be known as the “Visegrad group”, formed by Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland. The only possible cooperation that the Visegrad group contemplated, was one in defence of the common external border, a line that was eventually adopted by the EU. Instead of working on internal reforms, that would have allowed for a common asylum system to be established, the EU decided to react with securitization and externalization measures, aimed at curbing the number of arrivals in the Union (Weber, 2017). This shift is what led the crisis to unfold, a humanitarian crisis suffered both by people on the move and by the countries in which people got progressively stuck.

4.2.2. The Closure of the Corridor (2015-2016)

The first signal of the forthcoming closure of the corridor was the construction, by Hungary, of a fence at the border with Serbia in September 2015. Following Hungary’s decision to close its border, Serbia redirected the transport of refugees towards Croatia which, in turn, started facilitating the journey of migrants and refugees towards Slovenia (Beznec et al., 2016; Šelo Šabić, 2017). The next country to shift its approach was North Macedonia, that between March and April 2016 closed its border with Greece, which resulted in the number of people stuck in the camp of Idomeni, on the Greek side of the border, to rise up to 15,000 (Beznec et al., 2016). This move was a reaction to the closure coming from the north, including the adoption of a quota system by Austria, that had a chain effect southward along the route (Šantić et al., 2017). As Šelo Šabić (2017) argues, crucial were also the meetings that took place in Vienna and Belgrade in February 2016, in which the Interior Ministers of Austria, Croatia and Slovenia met, without consulting the EU, representatives
of the WB countries to push for a coordinated closure of the route (Federal Ministry of the Interior of Austria, 2016, February 24).

Soon, Serbia undertook a similar securitization shift. From April 2016 on, the informal settlements in the parks of Belgrade, that had been tolerated until that moment, started being evicted. In July, Serbian army and police were sent to the borders with Bulgaria and Macedonia. Such moves by North Macedonia and Serbia have to be understood in relation to the EU and its expectations towards the two Balkan countries tied to the Union by the promise of membership. As noted by Beznec et al. (2016) “the humanitarian face from 2015, but also this new wave of securitization, are functioning as instruments for the achievement of other political goals […] especially as means for the country’s accession to the EU”. “The respect for human rights was emphasized”, they continue “in order to show that Serbia has moved beyond its nationalist past and is ready to join the EU. Similarly, securitization […] serves to represent Serbia as a reliable partner to the EU” (p. 60).

In the meanwhile, the EU concluded the agreement that would have the biggest effect in stopping people on the move from undertaking their journey: the deal with Turkey. In the agreement, stipulated on March 18, 2016, Turkey committed to taking back all “new irregular migrants” arriving in Greece from Turkey, and to preventing future irregular crossings from taking place. The EU, from its part, agreed to resettle one Syrian from Turkey for each Syrian taken back by Turkey. Furthermore, it committed, once the number of refugees in Greece would have lowered, to resettle a large part of the 3 million refugees present in Turkey. In addition, 3 billion Euros were sent to Turkey to handle the humanitarian crisis (European Council, 2016, March 18). The deal, despite not having functioned as planned, had anyway fulfilled its main goal: “to substantially curb the number of arrivals in Greece and prevent their onward movement” (Weber, 2017, p. 9).

As noted by Beznec et al. (2016), there is a Difference between the Balkan route, which is historic, continuous and clandestine, and the formalized corridor, which was legal or state-organized, but only temporary. While the formalized corridor could be closed, the Balkan route cannot be interrupted, it can only be criminalized (p. 63).

The Balkan route, in fact, is far from being closed. Following the official closure, hundreds of migrants and refugees continued traveling along the route, and many had made it to Europe. Their journey had, though, turned into a more invisible, dangerous, long, and expensive one, compared to 2015. The reception centres that had been set up all across the Balkans to host people on the move for a few days, turned into overcrowded centres where people stay for months, attempting to cross the border even dozens of times. Several “jungles” appeared, especially in proximity to the crossing points, where people live in extremely dire conditions, waiting for the next chance to cross.
4.3. Bosnia and Herzegovina: Becoming a Migrant Hotspot

The EU-Turkey deal, and the enhanced border control implemented in the Balkans, have resulted in an overall decrease in the number of people undertaking the journey and succeeding in reaching the EU in 2017. According to Frontex (2018), the “illegal border crossings” detected in the region in 2017 were 26,979, compared with 270,595 in 2016 and 2,081,366 in 2015. Despite the dramatic decrease, the attempts to travel across the Balkan peninsula have never stopped, rather, people on the move adapted to the obstacles put in place reshaping the migratory routes. The so-called Albanian-Montenegrin-BiH-Croatian sub-route started being increasingly used, while people stuck in Serbia started entering BiH to continue their journey from there (Frontex, 2018).


The number of entries in BiH, that until that moment had not been touched by the flow of migrants and refugees in a significant way, continued in 2018, with the number of arrivals steadily increasing month by month to reach the peak of 5,057 new arrivals in October (UNCT BiH, 2019a). Overall, in 2018, the authorities registered the arrival of 24,067 people, while the previous year they had been only 755 (UNCT BiH, 2019a). Despite the high number of people declaring their intention to seek asylum in the country upon their arrival, the actual applications that year have been much less (UNCT BiH, 2019a). This is due, on the one hand, to the fact that the majority of people on the move plan to continue their journey towards the EU but also, on the other hand, to the obstacles preventing the access to the asylum process, as reported also by UNCT BiH (2018). Since the beginning, the authorities noticed a progressive “accumulation of refugees and migrants at various potential exit points along the border with Croatia” (UNCT BiH, 2018, p. 11), which proved the intention of migrants and refugees to proceed past BiH. The obstacles preventing people to claim...
asylum might have, though, a much higher effect on the number of applications submitted than what is assumed. Ahmetašević and Mlinarević (2019) refer to have talked with many people, during their research, that would have considered remaining in BiH, if only the process had been more accessible. The official narrative provided by both state institutions and international organizations, is that people on the move look at BiH as a transit country, narrative that legitimizes the absence of any long-term solutions, like integration plans, or the construction of better reception centres. “Permanency”, say the researchers, “is avoided at any cost” (Ahmetašević & Mlinarević, 2019, p. 8). This attitude ignored the fact that more and more people would have progressively started accumulating in BiH, willing or not, because of the enhanced border control implemented by Croatia, as eventually happened. At the end of 2018, 4,500 to 5,000 people were estimated to be present in the country (UNCT BiH, 2019a).

4.3.1. A Slow (and Inadequate) Reaction

BiH appeared unprepared to deal with the new situation, and slow in taking the necessary measures to properly accommodate people on the move and safeguard their rights, including the right to claim asylum. The slowness and inadequacy with which BiH reacted can be, to a large extent, traced back to the country’s highly dysfunctional political system which renders agreement difficult on measures across the different levels of governance – state, entity, cantonal and municipal.

At the time when the inflow of migrants and refugees started becoming visible, the only facility meant to host asylum seekers was the Asylum Centre in Delijaš, in the Sarajevo Canton, managed by the Ministry of Security and counting 154 beds (UNCT BiH, 2018). Given the high number of arrivals, people on the move started being accommodated in the Immigration Centre in Lukavica, East Sarajevo, a closed facility where migrants are hosted under a regime of detention, and in the Refugee Reception Centre Salakovac, 250 beds, originally meant for people who have been granted asylum. But this was still far from being enough, so the great majority of people had to find alternative accommodation – which for many meant sleeping in parks, abandoned buildings, and squats (UNCT BiH, 2018). This, in turn, made it impossible to get access to the asylum process, that was only possible after registering an address of stay (UNCT BiH, 2018).

In June 2018, the EU started sending funds to BiH, to help it respond to what was turning into a humanitarian crisis. Such funds were allocated to IOM, which came to have the monopoly of the management of the situation, overriding the state and local authorities (Ahmetašević & Mlinarević, 2019). With the EU funds IOM started setting up new reception centres in the Sarajevo and Una-Sana Cantons. The first, the Sedra TCR, an abandoned hotel, was opened in July close to Bihać, in
Una-Sana Canton. In October 2018, some old military barracks in Hadžići, close to Sarajevo, were turned into the Ušivak TCR. In November, two centres of Bira and Miral were opened, both former factories, the first located in Bihać and the second in Velika Kladuša. According to the report by UNCT BiH (2019a), as of December 31, 4,212 people were accommodated in these centres and the previously existent structures, out of an estimated number of people present in the country ranging between 4,500 and 5,000. One of the reasons why the centres were opened so late, which caused the emergence of makeshift camps, was the difficulty to reach an agreement on where to locate such centres, for the opposition of local authorities (Ahmetašević & Mlinarević, 2019). The fact that IOM had the means, while the authorities of BiH detained the formal responsibility, allowed for a continued shifting of the blame for the belated response with which the situation has been handled (Ahmetašević & Mlinarević, 2019). But the response has also been insufficient, considering the quality of the service offered to people accommodated in the TCRs, as Ahmetašević and Mlinarević (2019) extensively show. In many of the structures, both the safety and the wellbeing of the residents are neglected. The problems range from inadequate medical assistance, to episodes of violence ascribed to the private security companies employed by IOM, to lack of privacy, overcrowding, lack of heating and hot water. As Ahmetašević and Mlinarević (2019) state, “there was sufficient time and funding to find more humane, dignified, and sustainable accommodation” (p. 7). In fact, such conditions are hard to understand considering that the EU has allocated at least €30 million to IOM between 2018 and 2019 (European Commission, 2019, October 24).

4.3.2. The Crisis in Una-Sana Canton

The Canton of Una-Sana, in the north-west of BiH, is where the crisis has been felt the most. Since the beginning of 2018, thousands of people started accumulating there, from where they would try to cross into Croatia. But for the first half of the year, both media and international organizations focused on Sarajevo, neglecting the Una-Sana Canton (Ahmetašević & Mlinarević, 2019). People on the move were thus assisted only by local volunteers and NGOs. Makeshift camps started appearing, like the Borići camp in Bihać and the Trnovi camp in Velika Kladuša (Ahmetašević & Mlinarević, 2019). During the summer, the initially tolerant atmosphere started changing. The local population started complaining about the management of the situation and the large presence of people on the move. The discontent resulted, in October, in a three-days protest in Bihać, attended by around 1,000 people demanding that migrants were relocated outside the city and that any further influx was prevented (Lakic, 2018, October 23). Simultaneously, a meeting took place between the Minister of Security of BiH, the Prime Minister of Una-Sana Canton and the head of
IOM in BiH, in which it was stressed the need to enhance border control in order to stop the inflow of migrants into BiH, but also to control the movement of people already in the country, in order to impede them reaching the Una-Sana Canton (Vlada Unsko Sanskog Kantona, 2018, October 23). This led to intra-country pushbacks from the Canton and the establishment of checkpoints where people on the move arriving from Sarajevo were forced out of the buses and left in empty fields, deprived of shelter and assistance (Ahmetašević & Mlinarević, 2019). Following these developments, the centres of Bira and Miral were opened in November, and in December IOM started the renovation of the student dorm that constituted the Borići camp (UNCT BiH, 2019a).

In 2019 arrivals kept increasing, exceeding the arrivals recorded in 2018 month on month. From May 2019 on, the estimated presence of people on the move in the country was ranging from 7,500 to 8,500, with more or less half of the population living outside formal facilities (UNCT BiH, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d). Since migrants and refugees kept accumulating in the Una-Sana Canton, at the beginning of the summer the Bihać City Council decided that people found in the city had to be relocated, from then on, to Vučjak (UNCT BiH, 2019c). The Vučjak camp, where at a particular time up to 2,000 people were estimated to live (Durand & Husaković, 2019) made it quickly into local and international news, as a symbol of the hellish conditions in which people on the move were forced to live in BiH (Delauney, 2019, December 7; Vladisavljevic, 2019, July 3). The camp, a former landfill, was located in a forest surrounded by mined areas, around 10 kilometres away from the city. Snakes, methane gas exhalations, mines, and contagious skin infections, in addition to the lack of running water and of any health and sanitation facility rendered the site completely inadequate for human life (Durand & Husaković, 2019). The UN and IOM always refused to provide assistance in the camp, due to the impossibility, even willingness, to create better conditions because of the location of the camp (Durand & Husaković, 2019). The UNCT advocated for the relocation of migrants and refugees, stressing that “Vučjak poses very significant health and safety risks and is not equipped to accommodate migrants and asylum seekers in accordance with international standards” (UNCT BiH, 2019c, p. 6). Nevertheless, people kept being brought to Vučjak even during the winter. In early December Dunja Mijatović, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, visited the camp which she defined “shameful”. She also criticized the general management of the situation, including IOM centres, and advocated for long-term measures to address the situation (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 2019, December 6). Finally, on December 10th, the camp was closed, and 745 migrants and refugees relocated to Ušivak and to the new IOM centre of Blažuj (UNCT BiH, 2019d).

In 2020 the situation seems to be continuing in the same direction. According to the last UNHCR data available, as of February end there were 7,938 people on the move in the country, 49 percent of
migrants and refugees present in the whole WB region (UNHCR, 2020), while at the end of December 2019, the maximum capacity of the eight main centres present in the country was 4,175 (UNCT BiH, 2019d). Furthermore, as in all WB countries, the number of arrivals in the first months of 2020 has been higher than it had been in 2017, 2018, and 2019 (UNHCR, 2020). The recent Covid-19 pandemic, furthermore, is opening new and even worse scenarios for people stuck in BiH and in other Balkan countries.

4.3.3. A Violent Border

People on the move have been heading towards and settling in Una-Sana Canton since the very first months of 2018. The strengthening of border control implemented by Croatia from 2016 on, though, has made it more and more difficult to cross the border, which is why so many people, unable to proceed in their journey, got progressively stuck in the Canton. The enhanced border control is proof of a progressive shift towards securitization that Croatia undertook starting from 2016, until when the country had instead preferred to facilitate the movement of migrants and refugees across the country (Župarić-Ilijić & Valenta, 2019). With the excuse of protecting its own but also the EU’s border, Croatia has also resorted to illegal practices, such as pushbacks and police violence, as extensively demonstrated by the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN). Collective expulsions operated by the Croatian police have been documented since early 2017 and denounced by numerous actors, including Amnesty International, UNHCR, and Human Rights Watch, but “left unsanctioned”, the researchers of BVMN (2020) state, the violence increased, reaching “examples of torture, inhumane or degrading treatment of the expelled people, perpetrated by Croatian police officers” (p. 2). In 2019, BVMN collected evidence from 2,475 victims of violent push-backs occurred along the Croatian border with Serbia and BiH, the majority of which happened between Croatia and BiH (Border Violence Monitoring Network, 2020).

While Croatian authorities have first denied the allegations, then refused to investigate on the violations, then even downplayed the pushbacks (Border Violence Monitoring Network, 2020), the EC has in October 2019 given its approval for the entry of the country in the Schengen area, stating that it had fulfilled all necessary criteria (including the development of an adequate external border management, which has been found deficient in the previous evaluations), and passing the ball to the Council for finalizing the decision (European Commission, 2019b). In the report justifying the decision, the EC recognizes the “challenge” constituted by “the allegations of denial of access to the asylum procedure and of use of force by law enforcement officials at the border”, and states that “all the measures taken by Croatia for the control of its external borders must comply with the
Charter, EU and international human rights obligations” (European Commission, 2019b, p. 13). Allegations that nevertheless did not affect the decision of the EC regarding the readiness of Croatia to enter the Schengen area. The promise, by Croatia, to initiate investigations concerning the allegations, was a sufficient reassurance (European Commission, 2019b).

The border between BiH and Croatia continues to be an extremely violent one, the evidence proving it overwhelming. This violence seals the border, allowing very few people to proceed along their journey, while the great majority remains blocked in BiH, with neither the possibility to proceed, nor that to integrate in the Bosnian society.
5. A Multilevel Analysis of the Current Situation in BiH

In this chapter, I adopt a multilevel approach to investigate the current situation in BiH. In order to do that, I take into account the points of view, interests, strategies, and challenges of some of the actors involved, which I locate at three different levels. In the first section I present an analysis of the roles and strategies of the actors located at the higher level – in particular, the EU and IOM. This section was inspired by the themes that emerged during the interviews, and is built on an in-depth analysis of documents, agreements, press releases, and similar, that allowed me to reconstruct the modality of the involvement of such actors in the current situation in BiH. The second section focuses on the people that I interviewed and the social groups they represent, namely, independent activists and civil society workers. Finally, the third section presents an analysis of the understandings, reactions, and responses of the citizens of BiH, as they are perceived by my informants.

5.1. The Management of the Migrant and Refugee Situation in BiH

During the summer of 2018, OSCE released a report which helps identifying and situating the actors which were, at that time, more visibly engaged in the situation (OSCE Mission to BiH, 2018). These are: BiH border police, BiH Service for Foreigners’ Affairs (SFA), local administrations, local police forces, prosecutors’ offices and courts, health centres, social welfare centres, NGOs, informal volunteer groups and religious communities. For each of these stakeholders, OSCE assessed the responses they were providing to the situation, and the gaps in such responses. The overall finding was the existence of a poor coordination among stakeholders, and of a general unpreparedness to deal with the situation. Concerning law enforcement bodies – such as SFA, which is the organization within the Ministry of Security in charge of carrying out administrative and inspection tasks on “aliens” and asylum seekers, border police and local police forces, OSCE (2018) pointed out that the staff appeared to lack both human and material resources, and proper indications and training on how to perform their tasks. For what concerns the delivery of health care and other services to people on the move, OSCE (2018) found health care centres and welfare centres incapable of providing adequate support, which has been taken on by NGOs and informal groups of volunteers, the former identified as “the main providers of direct humanitarian assistance” (p. 31). The activity of both was, though, limited by lack of funding and lack of coordination with other actors. Although useful, the assessment conducted by OSCE (2018) did not take into consideration – for the authors’ own admission – a crucial actor, represented by
international organizations, which importance grew more and more in the following month. Furthermore, it concentrated on the actors operating in the field, dismissing those operating “backstage”, such as the EU, which, I argue in this thesis, had a crucial role both in originating the situation, and in shaping how it has been addressed.

Since the winter 2017/18, in fact, the Balkan country has entered into the sphere of influence of the EU and become a target of its externalization strategy to curb migration. The fact that the presence of the EU in BiH was already prominent, and the fact that the Union and the Balkan country already shared a number of agreements, treaties and projects – as it was shown in the previous chapter, made the EU’s job easier. While Frontex – the EU Agency in charge of monitoring and controlling the external EU border – is increasing its presence and authority in BiH to enforce border control, the externalization of migration management on Bosnian soil is carried out with EU resources by IOM, which detains the monopoly of the management of the situation. As for the Bosnian government(s), it seems to lack both the willingness and the capacity to deal with the challenge represented by the large number of refugees stuck within its borders, while being pointed out by the EU as the responsible for the dire conditions in which people on the move live (Delegation of the EU to BiH & EUSR in BiH, 2019, July 17).

While the inefficient response of the BiH government and local authorities was addressed in the background chapter, this chapter focuses on the role that the EU had in generating the situation and shaping the response that was given to it. The discussion is informed by the theories presented in chapter 3.1., which shed light on the EU approach to irregular migration and its implementation in third countries. The result of the discussion is the elaboration of a critique of the EU approach to migration management which, I argue, not only leads to unacceptable living conditions, risks, and denial of rights for people on the move entrapped in BiH, but also to the impossibility, for BiH, to proceed in its already arduous progress towards stabilization.

5.1.1. EU and IOM: Partners in Externalization

Following the increasing inflow of migrants and refugees in BiH, the EU started implementing its strategies to curb irregular migration in the country, a process that was facilitated by the pre-existent relationship between BiH and the EU. But how is such strategy performed?

In May 2018, the BiH Council of Ministers adopted the Draft Action Plan for Emergency Measures, aimed at working on “better border control, more effective fight against illegal migration, realization of readmission agreements, intensifying activities to prevent migrants’ smuggling and strengthening of asylum center capacities” (“BiH security minister: Migrants’ crisis is under control
of BiH Institutions," 2018, May 19), to which followed a formal request to the EU for assistance. The EU responded with a first financial aid amounting to €7.2 million. Such support was included in the framework of the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance II (IPA II) under the term “special measures”. IPA is an instrument by which the EU supports reforms in to-be member countries. “Support to asylum, migration and integrated border management – it is stated in the decision concerning the allocation of the €7.2 million – is foreseen […] under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance II (IPA II), within the Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights sector” (European Commission, 2018, p. 2). Within the same framework, a special measure of €13 million was allocated in April 2019, increased with an additional €10 million in August, considered the increase of the number of people on the move in the country and the dire conditions they were subjected to (European Commission, 2019a). As it is stated in the decisions concerning the allocation of such special measures, the EU’s overall goal is to “support BiH in managing migration flows”, while the specific objectives are to support the country

In improving the capacity for identification, registration and referral of third-country nationals crossing the border, providing adequate and protection-sensitive accommodation and basic services for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants […] as well as strengthening capacity for border control and surveillance, thereby also contributing to the fight against and prevention of migrant smuggling, trafficking in human beings and other types of cross-border crime. (European Commission, 2018, p. 5)

Overall, in 2018 and 2019, the EU has allocated €36 million for the management of the migrant and refugee situation in BiH, including the €30 million special measures funds (European Commission, 2019, October 24). To this sum has to be added a number of previous financial contributions, such as a €24.6 million fund, allocated since 2007 to support BiH in implementing migration and border management, and contributions of €8 million within the programme “Support to Protection-Sensitive Migration Management in the Western Balkans and Turkey”.

When it come to the €30 million allocated as special measures, it is crucial to note that they have been entrusted to IOM, selected for its “expertise in border management related programmes” (European Commission, 2018, p. 6) to “indirectly manage” the funds. The first IOM mission in BiH started during the siege of Sarajevo, in 1992. After the war, IOM’s main activity concerned the assistance to returnees that had fled the country during the war. Now, as stated in the opening page of the organization’s website, “IOM’s programmes aim to prevent irregular migration, stop the trafficking of human beings, contribute to national development, and assist the BH Government to manage migration activities” (IOM in BiH, n.d.-a). On the one hand, IOM in BiH is involved in the setting up and management of six TRCs, five of which were opened in 2018 (Sedra, Bira, Borići
and Miral in Una-Sana Canton, Ušivak in Sarajevo Canton), and one in late 2019 (Blažuj in Sarajevo Canton), following the evacuation of the infamous informal camp of Vučjak. The centres are run prevalently by IOM, in collaborations with other partners such as UNHCR, the Danish Refugee Council, and the SFA.

But the main role of IOM in BiH is to support the country in the development of an adequate and self-sufficient response to the migratory phenomenon, so it can eventually become independent in its role of filter of irregular migration directed towards the EU. As stated in the 2019 EU decision to allocate funds to BiH through IOM, “a mid-term solution is needed to stabilise the situation with a view of gradually handing-over the response to the authorities” (European Commission, 2019a, p. 3). Relatedly, on its webpage, IOM states that it “provides support to the Border Police and the Service for Foreigners’ Affairs to further strengthen their human and technical capacity to register irregular migrants” (IOM in BiH, 2020, February). Such support is implemented in a security rationality, that as it was shown in the chapter 3.1., entails the conceptual merging of irregular migration, terrorism, drugs trafficking etc., under the label of “cross-border crime”. In the section dedicated to “irregular migration” on the IOM in BiH’s website, the organization mentions the problem of drug trafficking; it is not clear whether the need to “ensure that this border does not become an extensive porous entry point to the EU” (IOM in BiH, n.d.-b) refers to the passage of human beings, drugs, or both. It is also telling that such concern appears on the webpage of IOM in BiH, which should be instead committed to the needs first of all of its target population (people on the move), and secondly of the country that hosts it. IOM in BiH is committed neither to one nor the other’s interests, but exclusively to those of its sponsor, the EU, as it is openly stated.

IOM, operating in BiH on behalf of the EU, as theorized by Lavenex (2016) and showed by Brachet (2016), has the crucial role of providing legitimacy to the Union’s strategy, by covering the securitization plans with the rhetoric of emergency response and humanitarian intervention. The organization carries with it the legitimacy given by international norms and treaties that supposedly inform its mission and action. This is perfectly exemplified in the BiH case, where IOM portrays its action as at the service of migrants and refugees, while in reality implementing its sponsor’s migration policies. In this regard, it is interesting that the EU chose IOM as its partner, instead, for example, of UNHCR, which is far less active in BiH than IOM. This might be due, first of all, to the preference for the IOM’s approach instead of the UNHCR’s one, being the former focused on “ordering” migratory movements, and the latter tied to the 1951 Geneva Convention and to the mission of protecting refugees. But on the other hand, this choice mirrors the attempt to change the terms of the discussion about people on the move. The categories of “migrant” and “refugee” are in fact arbitrary, and their appointment depends on who is in the position to define, and the goal that
such definition helps pursuing. Such categories, besides being artificial and unsuitable for describing the complexity of people’s movements, argue Crawley and Skleparis (2018), are also deeply political. “constantly formed, transformed and reformed in response to shift in political allegiances or interests on the part of refugee-receiving countries and the evolution of policy and law” (p. 51). This is particularly true, continue the authors, in times of crisis, when categories might be “reformed” in order to dismantle systems of protection which are normally in place (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018). IOM and UNHCR have their target populations respectively in “migrants” and “refugees”, thus the choice of partnering with one or the other organization is strongly tied to the discourse that the EU wants to promote about who people on the move are, and consequently which rights they are entitled to.

Besides providing legitimacy to the EU approach to migration management, the partnership with international organizations also allows to escape accountability. According to Ahmetašević and Mlinarević (2019), the fact that the EU decided to allocate resources to BiH through IOM, instead of directing them to the state, might be due to the latter’s dysfunctionality and high corruption. But, they argue, “stripping the state authorities of any responsibility, and taking over their role, could be dangerous. Unlike international organization, state institutions could be held accountable and have more obligation to work transparently” (Ahmetašević & Mlinarević, 2019, p. 8). By directing resources to international organizations, both “the government and the citizens of BiH are completely removed from this process” (Ahmetašević & Mlinarević, 2019, p. 42): the former has its obligations taken away, while the latter are denied the right of holding the implementors of the measures in question accountable. Most importantly, the EU manages to escape accountability, because in this multitude of actors, it is not immediate to trace back the situation to the EU’s plan to keep migrants and refugees out. This plurality of actors, and the lack of clarity about their respective responsibilities and tasks, “keeps enabling the blame and responsibility shifting” (Ahmetašević & Mlinarević, 2019, p. 42). The authors finally claim that the decision to not engage the state, has been a missed opportunity to enhance its functionality, a long-standing objective of the EU and of the international community. As I argue in the next section, though, this would not necessarily have been in line with the EU’s strategy and objectives at the current time.

5.1.2. Externalization at the Expense of Stabilization

The EU/IOM involvement in BiH is two-faced. On the one hand, their response has been crucial – even if delayed and insufficient – to avoid a humanitarian crisis that would have been even worse without the intervention of IOM and other international organizations. On the other hand, such
organizations, and in particular IOM, play a crucial role in the EU strategy to curb irregular migration, which is at the origins of the humanitarian crisis itself. The EU-funded and IOM-implemented efforts to enhance the ability of BiH police and border police to control irregular migration, through coordination activities and donations of equipment (Dragojlovic, 2019, December 16; IOM in BiH, 2019, October 11) with the aim of impeding people on the move to reach the EU, contributes in fact to rendering BiH a bottleneck for migrants and refugees. The fact that this aspect has been prioritized over the humanitarian response, is testified by the conditions inside the IOM-run TRCs, which are far from being decent, as extensively demonstrated by Ahmetašević and Mlinarević (2019), despite the enormous funds that the EU directs to IOM.

A humanitarian crisis was difficult to avoid even because BiH lacks all what is needed to deal with such a situation properly: the political stability that would allow for efficient and coherent measures to be decided and implemented; infrastructures and facilities; financial resources. The EU believed it could solve the problem by directing financial resources to BiH, and by employing IOM to help develop the country’s capacity to deal with the inflow of migrants and refugees. But at the basis of the lack of compliance of BiH with the EU’s plans there is a highly dysfunctional system that can be traced back to the Dayton Agreement, as it was discussed in the background chapter. The low level of centralization, the high independence accorded to the two entities and the cantons, the attempt to grant representation to the three main ethnic groups which instead resulted in a platform for the performance of an aggressive ethnopolitics, resulted, during the last couple of years, in the humanitarian crisis in Una-Sana Canton, that felt abandoned in dealing with the situation, in the refusal by the authorities of the RS to open any reception centre in the entity, and in the incapacity of the central government to establish a common and coherent strategy to deal with the situation (Stanicek & European Parliamentary Research Service, 2019).

*Vis-à-vis* BiH and the whole Balkan region, the EU seems to have contradicting goals. On the one hand, the EU expects BiH to respect the commitments it has agreed upon by signing the SAA, and to make good use of the financial resources it is providing. In the EU documents, the safeguarding of human rights and of decent conditions for people on the move figure as a primary concern that BiH needs to address (European Commission, 2019a). BiH, for its part, is clearly not doing enough in this regard, and the EU seems annoyed by this incapacity – even though it is important to keep in mind that BiH has been stripped of great part of its tasks and responsibilities concerning the management of the situation. But the political instability that is at the basis of such incapacity, is at the same time useful to the EU because it allows it to carry out its externalization plans without any impediment. With BiH turning into a transit country in 2018, and with the following initiation of the EU’s externalization plans in the country, the stabilization goal has been put aside. Even worse:
the EU’s strategy has caused both internal (between central and local authorities, and between the two entities) and regional tensions (in particular, between BiH, Serbia, and Croatia). As argued by Saide Liperi (2019), “contrary to stabilisation, these policies are fomenting instability, while absorbing resources otherwise intended to strengthen democratic institutions and social policies” (p. 4). In the wake of the refugee crisis in BiH, the EU decided to abandon its long-standing stabilization goals for the Balkan country, to benefit instead from the existing instability, which allowed to render BiH a filtering buffer-zone, one where racialized “others” could be dealt with out of sight, at a distance which allows to employ any kind of measures. It is hard to tell where the line between wanted and unwanted, expected and unexpected effects of the EU’s approach in BiH can be drawn. The stabilization goal has been put aside mainly to benefit from the fragility of the political system to carry out undisturbed the externalization of migration control. But such fragility, on the other hand, impedes BiH to take on the role of “filter zone” more independently (in its capacity of being a filter, not in the willingness to be such, which comes anyway from the asymmetrical relation with the EU). Moreover, internal instability and conflicting relations among WB countries, would be negative for the EU as well in the long run, since they would mean, in the worst scenario (another war), having a source of undesired migrants at its very gates, among many other consequences. The EU’s strategy appears thus extremely short-sighted, besides being unjust and even deadly for those suffering its immediate effects.

5.1.3. The Deployment of Frontex in BiH

Having discussed the role of IOM in the management of migration in BiH, it is now crucial to mention how the other component of the exportation of migration control instruments to third countries, namely, the externalization of border control (Boswell, 2003), is carried out in the Balkan country by the EU. Frontex is the embodiment of the migration-security nexus and of how it has been linked with externalization in the EU migration policy, especially during and following the 2015-16 refugee crisis. In response to the crisis, the Agency’s mandate was in fact reinforced, to strengthen its coordinated action on the members states’ external borders, and especially to “include[s] measures in and with third countries, and responsibilities ‘behind the border’” (European Commission, 2015, December 15). To such reinforcement corresponded an increased budget, that according to the 2015 proposal was supposed to increase from €143 million in 2015, to €322 million in 2020 (European Commission, 2015, December 15). In 2019, Frontex’s faculties reached a new level, when for the first time a “status agreement” signed between the EU and Albania allowed the Agency to carry out
its “first ever joint operation outside the EU” (European Commission, 2019, May 21). Following Albania, the EU has concluded similar agreements with Montenegro and Serbia, while those with BiH and North Macedonia have been initiated. As it can be read in the draft of the Agreement under discussion with BiH, such agreement will allow for “joint operations” and “rapid border interventions” to be carried out by the Agency upon the drawing of an operational plan that needs to be approved by the Agency, the BiH border police, and the member state on which border the operation is supposed to be carried out (Council of the European Union, 2019). In general, such operations are to be carried out by the Agency at the presence of the BiH border police, but the document makes an exception for “exceptional circumstances” (Council of the European Union, 2019, p. 8). Furthermore, while the operations that Frontex can directly carry out in BiH need to take place on the border with a member state, the Agreement states that the Agency:

May support Bosnia and Herzegovina to control efficiently its border with any country that is not a Member State of the European Union by other means than deployments of European Border and Coast Guard teams with executive powers, such as: capacity building, trainings, risk analysis and deployment of experts without executive powers at the border crossing points.” (Council of the European Union, 2019, p. 22).

In the draft of the Agreements, there are several mentions to the commitment to fundamental rights during the to-be joint operations. In particular, it is stated that:

Members of the team shall, in the performance of their tasks and in the exercise of their powers, fully respect fundamental rights and freedoms, including as regards access to asylum procedures, human dignity and the prohibition of torture, inhuman or degrading treatment, the right to liberty, the principle of non-refoulement and the prohibition of collective expulsions, the rights of the child and the right to respect for private and family life (Council of the European Union, 2019, p. 16).

But such commitment does little to reassure about the respect of rights during border control operations, that as it was shown in the background chapter are already extremely problematic, and that would likely worsen if reinforced with the support of Frontex. This claim is sustained by a report by Fotiadis (2020), demonstrating how Frontex’s agents, deployed at the Serbian-Hungarian border to assist the Hungarian border police, has at least witnessed, if not participated, in abuses committed towards people attempting to cross into Hungary, from 2016 on.

As it was shown in this chapter, the involvement of the EU and of its partners in the management of the migrant situation in third countries, is not a guarantee of the protection of fundamental rights of people on the move, rather the opposite. Being the goal of the EU that of preventing people on the move from entering its territory, any action put in place to achieve that goal entails a certain degree
of violence, either active or passive: from impeding people to move forward, to forcing people to travel illegally putting their lives at the mercy of smugglers, to pushing them back in case they manage to cross the border. Despite the “on paper” commitments to fundamental rights, which mirror the self-depiction of the EU as “land of human rights”, its plan denies them and sacrifices them for the sake of the perceived security of EU citizens and states.

5.2. Voices from the Field: The Struggle of Activists and Civil Society Workers

In this chapter, I shift the focus from the higher, to what I called the intermediate level of actors involved in the situation: activists and civil society. This section consists of the presentation of the analysis of the interviews that I conducted with eight informants, all belonging to either one or the other group. The biggest portion of my informants (five out of eight) consists of independent activists. They are people engaged in activities in favour of people on the move in BiH, both in terms of humanitarian assistance, and in the form of political activism. They belong to an informal network, based mainly on social media, which does not have a defined structure and whose members operate in different ways and with different degrees of commitment. M., B., S., A., and L. – as are referred to in the following pages – belong to this first group. In this section, I use their inputs to discuss the role of activism in this particular circumstance in BiH, the relation of activists with the “big” actors which I wrote about in the previous section, the challenges they face and the potential they think their action can have. The second group includes two workers – R. and N. – in a CSO dealing with peacebuilding and reconciliation. Here, I use their considerations mainly to understand the role of civil society in the situation of concern. Finally, the eighth interviewee, G., is a local employee in one of the international organizations dealing with people on the move in BiH. Of particular interest is his perception of the role of the EU and international organizations, and how it differs from those of the other informants, especially the “activists”.

5.2.1. Activism and its Challenges

When the situation started unfolding in BiH, a large number of citizens started engaging in humanitarian assistance, to provide for people that for months have been ignored both by state authorities, and by the international organizations. A couple of my informants were already active in other countries along the Balkan route when BiH was not yet part of it, while others felt the moral duty to get involved when people on the move started entering BiH. At the beginning, the
condition of emergency forced activists to concentrate on humanitarian assistance, including food and clothes distributions. As B. explained, “it was a pure response to the immenseness of the situation, it was so big, and it was emergency”. With time passing, though, most of my informants understood that it was important to go beyond mere humanitarian assistance, and to start focusing on other aspects. A., for instance, who was deeply involved in humanitarian work as an independent activist when people on the move started arriving in his city, decided that it was time to change strategy, as he said, to “help more, but less people”. He sees the people that he helps not as migrants or refugees but as friends. Even if he still spends time at the train station where people on the move have settled because unable to move further, he is now mainly occupied with integration activities, which entail help in finding jobs, housing, and, most importantly, the experience of simple, non-asymmetrical relationships, which often humanitarian assistance impedes, placing those who assist, and those who are assisted, on different levels of power, as I have discussed in chapter 3.2.2.

Many among my informants are convinced that “the answer to this isn’t humanitarian assistance”, as B. put it, bringing several arguments to sustain this claim. First of all, as B. and S. pointed out, when common citizens take on themselves the responsibility of humanitarian assistance, they “play the game” of those who should guarantee such service, namely, state authorities, which are thus relieved of their responsibility, and their inaction normalized – the critique Passy (2001) directs to politically disengaged “compassion”. Secondly, humanitarian work, as most of my informants who were involved in it admit, is extremely energy-draining, making it difficult to engage in political advocacy simultaneously. Lastly, on a more ethical level, B. admitted of not feeling comfortable with humanitarian work, because of what she experienced while being a refugee herself:

It's a bit awkward the humanitarian part [...] for us it was different, it was better in a sense, but I had personal experience of those days as refugees, of people giving you stuff, and I remember how bad I felt, it was coming from a normal life to being handed out stuff, and that has sort of lingered down with me, so yes we responded, I responded because people really needed food and… but it wasn't something I felt comfortable with, I thought always, and I still feel it, put us above, somehow.

This feeling of standing above, B. added, is what impedes to “maintain the political solidarity”, which according to Scholz (2008) entails joining a common struggle against an injustice, and which B. considers an essential component of her own activism with people on the move. As she said:

It's a question of solidarity, I think for all of us also responding to the fact that these borders being put up, with people actually coming from places where we contributed to whatever conflict, environmental degradation, what's happening, and just trusting the people had reasons for putting their lives in danger in the way they did, and this was the least we could do.
But doing political activism, in this situation, has proven to be extremely hard, for a number of reasons. First of all, it is difficult to mobilize citizens in a political sense. “It’s always the same bunch of people”, is an expression that was repeated by those, among my informants, who are more politically active. According to S. nothing in BiH is understood by citizens as a political issue, so even those who feel solidarity towards people on the move, express this sentiment only through humanitarian help. The realization of being few and lonely in this fight, generates a sense of powerlessness, which I witnessed in most of my informants. To make things even worse, there is the realization that their activism “is really against everyone”, as S. stated. In fact, while on the one hand state authorities stand, this time as always, on the other side of the barricade, in this case even those actors that have traditionally been on the activists’ and civil society’s side in their battles for gender equality, human rights, etc, namely, the international community and the EU, are not offering any support. The reason being the EU’s own role in generating the current situation in BiH, and its interests in relation to it. Activists lack allies but also an addressee to their claims. IOM de facto holds the monopoly of the management of the situation, but the fact that it is a non-state actor makes it hard to hold it accountable for the issues denounced by activists. Furthermore, even addressing state institutions and politicians is hard in BiH, because of the absence of actual policies to criticize, as a couple of activists complained about. In particular, B. explained how in BiH:

The parties that compete for power, they actually don't have a policy, and migration is not the only issue, there's a lot of issues, because these parties mostly exist to access power and resources through that power structure. They don't have policies, which makes it very difficult, you know, who do we talk to? Who is it, what is it we want to change? Because there is no policy! What are we changing?

The lack of backing and the small number of people who engage in activism, demanding human assistance to be offered to people on the move, the respect of their fundamental rights including the right to claim asylum, and addressing the poor job carried out by international organizations and by IOM in particular, render them easy target of obstruction and even defamatory attacks – as the accusation of being “fake news” – by the actors placed further up in the hierarchy.

All these elements, in addition to the fact that activism is for most a secondary, non-paid activity, led many to give up, and those who continue to experience sentiments of powerlessness, pessimism, and a general feeling of being overwhelmed by the amount of work, not to mention the emotional load caused by the kind of stories they come across during their interactions with people on the move. To some of my interviewees, I asked what pushed them to continue their activism. For M., it was the impossibility to simply ignore the struggles he witnessed, besides a personal predisposition towards empathy, perhaps originated by his own experience of displacement during the war of the
'90s. For B. it was a matter of political solidarity, that she also traced back to her own experience of war and displacement and to the realization that the struggle against this kind of injustices must be understood as a unique one. A. mentioned a moral commitment as what makes him continue. Even if it is hard, he added, he would never give up his independence as an activist, which allows him to be free, and to speak just for himself. For S., finally, it was a matter of being true to herself.

In a number of interviews, the relationship between local activists and international volunteers was addressed, which I find relevant to mention because it allows to better understand the standpoint of the local activists of BiH, or at least of those that I interviewed. By most of my informants, the attitude of a big portion of the international volunteers coming from the “Western world” was seen as problematic under several aspects. S. and B. denounced the lack of political awareness of a part of the international volunteers, in the sense that they dismiss the need to do advocacy preferring to concentrate on delivering humanitarian assistance. As B. explained, there have also been some friction, between “Bosnian feeling that we need to push politically, and the internationals saying, ‘we just need to feed’” – referring to Passy (2001), between some acknowledging the need to engage in political altruism, and others preferring to remain on the level of acts of compassion. On the other hand, S., B. and M. spoke about a “colonial attitude” that many international volunteers had in approaching the BiH context and its local activists, whose advice and knowledge of the system was not taken into account, whose competences were not respected, and whose potential in understanding the challenges people on the move were facing, because of their own experience of war, has been underestimated. As M. explained:

Internationals somehow underestimated our experience as refugees as well the experience of being new in a country, with a language that you don’t speak, don’t understand the system, you’re not that educated, you come from a different cultural background…

M. also mentioned the problem of white saviourism – which is, the engagement in acts of help that reward emotionally the actor, but do nothing to affect structural inequalities; as Teju Cole put it, “it is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege” (Cole, 2012, March 21). According to S., for many internationals it was simply “closer to come to Bosnia than to go to Africa”. In some of my informants, I noted a self-distancing from the “West” represented by international volunteers which on the one hand leads to a feeling of powerlessness due to “coming from the periphery”, but on the other hand is proudly claimed because it guarantees a protection from “the syndrome of the white saviour”, as M. put it, and the possibility to relate experiences in true solidarity. This two-faced concept is illustrated by these two quotes by S. and B.:
One problem is coming from the periphery [...] as periphery we are never considered in the dynamics important, and discussion around what is in the West, whether is racism, whether is... because we are excluded from being white and we are excluded from being black. We are part of Europe, but we are not. We are in decision-making, but we are not.

I'd like them [BiH citizens] to really not to see any of this happening through humanitarian eyes, but actually to find the political solidarity within themselves, and recognize that what happened to them in the ‘90s, not just them becoming refugees but the war itself, this is all part of the same machinery, the people either they are leaving their country because of war, because of poverty, because of ecological catastrophe, this is all part of the same, we are facing the same issues, or the same cause to these problems, and I would like them to tap into that.

In this section I discussed the involvement of those, among my informants, that self-define as activists, in the situation concerning people on the move in BiH. I explored their motivations, the ways in which they perform their activism, and the challenges they meet. Within the “situation” under analysis, regardless their efforts, the role of activists is marginal, in terms of possibility of affecting the status quo, as many of them admitted. “Nothing is going to change”, “I don’t see change coming” are expressions that kept being repeated. In most of the people that I interviewed, a sentiment of powerlessness prevailed, in connection with the acknowledgment that “people […] don’t have the power to help such a big problem”, as A. said. As B. stressed, the solution to this situation doesn’t lay among common people, nor in BiH, but in the EU.

5.2.2. The Current Management of the Situation According to Activists and Civil Society Workers

Most of my interviewees had strong and clear opinions about the current management of the situation by BiH institutions, the EU, and the international organizations, plus ideas about the role civil society could or should play. The most politically active among them, had an elaborate understanding of the role the EU had in generating the situation in BiH, and international organizations, and especially IOM, have in preserving it. Other activists expressed more locally directed criticisms, towards the BiH government and institutions, and some sectors of civil society. The two informants belonging to the “civil society” group, even though maintaining a critical approach towards the “higher-level” actors, see the efforts and potential of civil society in a more favourable way. Finally, the informant working for an international organization, showed an understanding of the situation more in line with the narrative promoted by the EU. Such narrative consists in the idea that BiH should become gradually independent in the management of the
situation, on the one hand assuring assistance to migrants and refugees and the protection of their rights, and on the other hand, implementing a stricter control of these people and their movement – the objectives tied to the assignment of funds to BiH (European Commission, 2018).

For what concerns the institutions and authorities of BiH, all my interviewees were disappointed by their lack of action and negligence towards people on the move present in the country and by the absence of collaboration between authorities at different levels. All agreed on the fact that BiH politicians and authorities are basically not interested in dealing with the situation. According to R., “they are just shifting their responsibility towards this issue, and nobody feels responsible, nobody wants to do anything”. In S.’s view, the presence of the international community was an excuse for BiH authorities not to take charge of the situation. According to G., the role of state institutions was often limited to giving the green light to those other actors operating in the field, but “the state institutions were not present, were not involved in this in their full capacities”. This assessment is confirmed by the report by OSCE (2018): the representatives of 18 NGOs actively involved with people on the move, lamented a lack of active involvement of the authorities. The authors thus warned about “a parallel social welfare system” – on civil society’s shoulders – “being created” (p. 32). On the other hand, some of my informants recognized that a number of structural problems causing such negligence – the numerous and discordant levels of governance, the confusion about mandates, the ethno-nationalistic nature of the political debate – pre-existed the current situation, to the extent that, according to B., “within the region Bosnia is definitely the worse country to come to”. According to S., the current situation violently brought to the surface the non-functionality of the state, besides contributing to its further dissolution. In her opinion, this non-functionality must be traced back to the Dayton agreement. In planning the post-war reconstruction of the country, S. explained, the international community decided to sponsor civil society, instead of the development of state institutions, which resulted in present-day institutions unable to guarantee social security to the citizens, and a civil sector which cannot do its part because dependent on external funding; a thesis which is supported by Belloni (2001), Lidén et al. (2016) and Likić-Brborić (2009).

Furthermore, the ethnic and territorial fragmentation, which was also based on, and reinforced by the Peace Agreement, is worsening divisions between local and state authorities, with for example Croat and Serb local authorities refusing to open centres on their territories, as N. and L. pointed out, and this lack of cooperation causing overcrowding in areas like the Una Sana Canton, in which as a consequence grows the feeling of having been abandoned by the state.

When it comes to the current situation, all my informants believe that BiH should take responsibility – all but L., according to whom BiH politicians would in any way use people on the move for their political gains, “dehumanizing them”. According to R. and G., it is a question of BiH
having a moral and legal responsibility to take care of the people present on its territory. M. contested the idea that BiH is a poor country and claimed that it would have the possibility to provide for these people, if only there was political willingness. According to A., it is a matter of “choosing the lesser evil”, and considering that the international organizations, in his opinion, had so far done a very poor job, pushing for an enhanced involvement of the state could be a possibility.

S.’s argument goes even further:

I had to kind of keep insisting this is responsibility of state, let us push the state to take responsibility. Of course, money is now being given to IOM, but let’s the state… demands the money is not given to IOM, and the state takes full responsibility. Of course, the state is corrupted, but IOM is corrupted as well. I mean, there is no difference. And unlike IOM, we can monitor the state, we can push the state to do more than actually IOM.

From her point of view, even if the state does not make a better use of the money that is currently being assigned to IOM, it would be crucial that the state gets to manage those resources, because its activity could be better monitored by citizens and activists. G. had a different opinion on this issue. He works for one of the international organizations operating alongside IOM, and, even though hoping for an assumption of responsibility by the state, embraced the idea that resources assigned to IOM are in better hands. “Up until now much more [of the financial resources have been assigned by the EU] to international organizations, due to transparency” – he stated. As he explained, international organizations submit reports to the EU which monitors their activity, and this in his view guarantees a proper use of the resources. But this monitoring activity by the EU over resources spent by IOM, even in the hypothesis that such resources were used properly, completely bypasses BiH and its citizens, ignoring their right to monitor and judge what happens in their country, as S. stressed, defining this practice neo-colonial. According to G., the EU’s goal is to lead BiH towards taking charge of the management of the situation. He was confident that the state would have soon received more resources by the EU, to be forced to assume responsibility. Taking charge of the situation, and providing a humane treatment to people on the move, G. added, would mean for BiH making a step towards the EU, both in a political and in a value-related sense:

They [the EU] are pressuring BiH to be much more involved in the migrants’ situation […]. They [BiH] have the responsibility and that’s why we can even hear and read the messages from the EU, that BiH as a country who wants to enter the EU must be able to resolve such problems, to work on such problems, and again to show an openness and willingness to provide humanitarian aid to migrants and refugees. […] our attitude should be objective and should be as much as possible tolerant, and since we claim that we want to be part the EU, then we should express and show this tolerance, openness.
As I argued in previous chapters, the EU approach towards irregular migration is centred on security rather than on human rights – even though the mainstream narrative stresses the latter – and the EU engagement in BiH is aimed at pursuing this security goal, by impeding migrants and refugees to reach the Union. If BiH, as G. hoped, adopted a more humane approach towards people on the move, it would have ended up being more loyal to “European values” than the EU itself. As I have previously mentioned, the EU was seen by most of my interviewees as merely following its agenda in BiH, even in a colonial way, as S. claims. Some, like N., clearly saw the EU as having a role not only in generating the situation in BiH, but in generating migratory movements as well, through military interventions, exploitation of land and resources, and so on. “This is a problem of the EU – stated N. – not of the WB”, and as such, confirmed B., “the solution lies in the EU”, adding that, since BiH citizens and activists do not have the power to change the EU, it should be up to EU citizens to put pressure on their governments and on the EU to change their approach towards irregular migration, among other things. But at the moment, according to many, change does not seem likely to come from the EU, which seems happy with the status quo.

As it was extensively covered in the previous sections, this status quo has been achieved by the EU in cooperation with international organizations. Almost all of my informants, besides G., agreed that the job carried out by international organizations, and in particular IOM, has been and still is an extremely poor one, especially considering the enormous financial resources they received. They intervened with delay, many argued, did not provide enough beds, and still do not offer decent conditions to people on the move hosted in TRCs. S. also mentioned the issue of private security companies employed by IOM, and of the ownership of the sites which have been turned into TRCs, denouncing the lack of transparency and potential corruption involved in the relationship between IOM and these subjects. According to N., the fact that big international organizations monopolized the management of the situation, is not a news in the BiH context. He took UNDP as an example:

They are infringing on the local capacities to actually deal with the floods, local capacities to actually do local development […] because they are the biggest […] they are taking all the money from the European Union, and they are implementing more projects than… UNDP implements at the moment more money than all other CSOs combined. And they are implementing projects that civil society should implement and implement projects that the state should implement.

According to S., this is a clear example of the colonial attitude of the international community in BiH. But in this specific situation, could local civil society play any role? The points of view of my informants diverged on this issue. According to G., local NGOs are already offering a great support, in cooperation with international organizations. Even in N.’s opinion civil society is playing an
important role, and he believes that because of its flexible and adaptive nature, it will naturally evolve towards a specialization in this field. When I asked him about the issue of funding, he acknowledged that CSOs that will attract funds from the international community, will probably be those adopting a security discourse, in line with the donors’ interests. According to many of my informants, the issue of funding for civil society in BiH is crucial. Since all local NGOs are donor-dependent, and since resources to address this situation are only going to IOM, and through it to partner organizations which are in most cases other international organizations, local civil society simply does not have the possibility to get involved. This issue was addressed also in the OSCE (2018) assessment where the authors noted how NGOs were under-funded and poorly coordinated with the other actors involved, which undermined the efficiency of their action. A., who is an independent activist, complained about the fact that the local NGOs operating in his city, do not dare raising their voice against the government, the local authorities, and the international organizations for how they are managing the situation. It is extremely tricky, in the context of BiH, for CSOs to maintain their political voice because of their condition of dependency from donors (Belloni, 2001), among which, as B. pointed out, stands the EU itself, with its plans and interests related to the situation in question. Civil society, though, according to R., has the duty to remember and honour its commitment to human rights. As she stated, CSOs should be active and vocal “for human rights and for human rights for all, not for specific groups you feel comfortable to work with”, something that she thinks is missing at the current state. One way in which civil society can contribute, according to her, is by developing and spreading a narrative about people on the move that could counter the one fabricated by media and politicians, to affect the public opinion.

5.2.3. Foreseen Possibilities and Challenges

In this section, I mention some of the challenges and possibilities that my interviewees foresaw in relation to the evolvement of the situation. The majority, as I have previously explained, share a feeling of pessimism due to their positionality, which is connected to the impossibility of having but a limited impact on the situation, and to the plans of the actors positioned higher up in the power structure, which clearly go in the opposite direction than the one my informants hope for. Some of my interviewees argued that if managed in the right way, the current situation could have been an opportunity for BiH. G., A., L. highlighted the added value of diversity in a society; M. explained how BiH has “the potential to become a multicultural society”; B. mentioned the current emigration of BiH citizens – according to her, including these newcomers in the society would be an opportunity for a country drained of its human capital. N. was less optimistic and stated that
seeing this situation as an opportunity was “just nice thinking” and utopic, considering all the problems affecting BiH. If there was an opportunity for BiH, he argued, it was years ago: Balkan states should have cooperated from the very beginning, to better confront the inflow of refugees and negotiate with the EU with a stronger voice. Even in S.’s view, it is now too late to take something good out of the current situation:

If it was handled from the start, but no, it’s actually just pointing further that the state is not functioning. [...] I would say if it was handled in a sense that money was given to the state, the state would kind of put the money in the health system, so everyone had equal access to health, both people here and people on the move... but it's not handled, it's... the problem is that the situation, the last two years further contributed to the dissolution of the state.

Such potential dissolution, which manifests itself in the non-cooperation between entities, cantons, and the state, preoccupies even more considering the militarization of BiH security forces that is coming with the EU plan to fortify the country’s capacities to control the migratory phenomenon. This militarization has been repeatedly denounced by activists even through an online petition undersigned, among the others, by the “volunteers of BiH” – the network my activist informants belong to. In the petition, directed to the EU ambassador in BiH Sattler, the signatories highlighted the fact that EU funds have been used to provide BiH security forces with new equipment, instead of being spent to guarantee decent conditions for people on the move. “The militarization of security forces can have detrimental consequences for the peace in BiH”, they argue, since “police forces remain divided along both entity and cantonal lines, controlled by the local elites for political but also in some cases even personal gains” (Feministički antimilitaristički kolektiv, Volonteri BiH, & Inicijativa Jer me se tiče, 2019). The same concern was expressed by M.:

We have police officers who think that they are the law [...] And if you feed their mentality that they have the ultimate power, you’ll end up having a really militarized police who is very abusive to migrants and also very very aggressive towards any positive change that might occur in the future.

Overall, most of my interviewees recognize the problem that the current situation is representing for BiH and its society, despite their personal predisposition towards people on the move and towards an idea of society able to include them. But the internal, systemic problems that the country presents, as well as those generated by its positionality within the region and vis-à-vis the EU, appear as obstacles that need to be addressed before any utopic idea of an inclusive society could be proposed.
5.3. Understandings of Citizens’ Reactions and Responses

In this last sub-chapter, I address the responses and attitudes of citizens of BiH to the current situation, on the basis of how they are perceived and understood by my informants. Because of the small number of interviews that I conducted, the fact that the selection of informants cannot be considered representative of the broader BiH society, and the impossibility to conduct a proper research specifically on this topic – which would have required, first of all, to involve a larger sample of the population – the following analysis does not aim nor claim to be a complete and conclusive review of the responses of the citizens of BiH to the situation. Rather, I aim at formulating and presenting some reflections that might be the basis for further research.

5.3.1. From the Initial Solidarity to Growing Fears and Intolerance

According to all my interviewees, solidarity towards people on the move, at least at a humanitarian level, was quite widespread initially, when the situation started unfolding at the beginning of 2018 and during the following months. This solidarity made it into local and international news, which at that time stressed the empathy that people of BiH were feeling towards refugees, supposedly based on their own experience of war and displacement ("Bosnian Asim Latic prepares 500 Meals for Migrants Daily!," 2018, September 21; Gadzo, 2018, October 7; Nuhefendić, 2018, May 29). This understanding was shared by few of my informants, like B. who stated: “in general, overall, at the very beginning, I think the response was very human, I think at that point we were still sort of able to tap into our own experience as refugees”. This solidarity response took mainly the form of humanitarian assistance, with people donating what they could, from clothes to food. It is not that all citizens where actively helping, many of my interviewees pointed out, but at least there was tolerance, and no one attempted to render life harder for people on the move.

But this tolerant attitude, in some cases developed into active solidarity, according to most of my informants was based on the belief that people on the move were simply transiting through BiH and that they would have spent in the country a short time, before continuing their journey. Throughout 2018, the number of migrants and refugees entering BiH kept rising, while crossing the border with Croatia became increasingly hard, which led to people getting stuck in Una-Sana Canton, where a widespread discontent among the locals started growing.

If we take into consideration that the Bosnian government hasn't responded, isn't responding, and is most likely not responding any time soon, – B. argued – I think also the patience and even those neutral people... you know, it tests your patience and your understanding, and it really takes the best of you to [maintain solidarity].
According to many observers, the protests that took place in Bihać in October 2018 had as their main target not people on the move, but state authorities, that had left the Una-Sana Canton and its citizens alone in dealing with an increasingly problematic situation (Corritore, 2018, October 23). As a confirmation to this interpretation, the Mayor of Bihać said: “our problem is not the migrants but the fact that we feel we are dealing with it alone and that the state does not function” (Maja Zuvela, 2018, July 26). But with time passing, people’s opinions about people on the move started changing. According to almost all my informants, what mostly affected the public opinion was an extremely negative narrative that started spreading through both informal online media and mainstream media, depicting people on the move as a threat for BiH and its citizens. A documentary produced by Mediacentar Sarajevo (Jukić-Mujkić, 2019) offers a detailed account of the widespread tendency to spread hate speech against people on the move through articles, they denounce, often reporting unverified episodes. A related report shows how mainstream media manipulate news reports to foster hostility against people on the move, represented as a homogeneous group of uncivilized people (Buljubašić, 2019, December 5). The news reported are in some cases based on actual facts, in other cases based on the unverified assumption that a “migrant” was involved in a certain crime news episode, while in other cases are simply fake news (Buljubašić, 2019, December 5).

Because of the explicit connections between mainstream media and political parties, several of my informants pointed out, media and political discourse go hand in hand. As N. stated:

The media, with the exception of few media outlets, is completely indentured to politicians. Like, they are basically serving their purposes. And when I was talking about the politicians, that they will use it for populistic daily politics, the media will just execute whatever they have… they will repeat it. So, in that sense, of course media has a big role, but media will shape the story how the politicians see it.

One of the most telling examples of this is the newspaper Dnevni Avaz, one of the most read in BiH, which is owned by Radončić, current Minister of Security. The newspaper, according to the aforementioned research, stands out for its negative attitude towards people on the move (Buljubašić, 2019, December 5), in line with the point of view of Radončić, who recently stated to be willing to deport 10.000 “illegal economic migrants” from the country (Z., 2020, April 22).

When trying to pinpoint the nature of the fears on which media and politicians base their hostile narratives, I got different answers from my informants, ranging from fear of the unknown “other”, to fear for security, to fear of losing material possessions, to fear of being replaced as a people. These fears can be grouped in two clusters, even though the dividing line between the two might be fine: identity-based fears, and material fears. According to most of my informants, fears connected
to security – fear of being robbed, of being victim of violence, etc. – are the most prevalent, and the ones media and politicians usually fuel. B. explains this fact as follows: “the sentiment is more prone to personal security and ‘they might break into your house’ […] rather than ‘they will take your jobs’, because there are no jobs to be taken”. Even though they relate to material concerns, I understand fears based on personal security as connected to a general fear of the “other”, on whom stereotypical and frightening attributions are attached for example by media. Some of my informants understood the success of this kind of narratives, as due to BiH having always been a country on the margins, not exposed to the passage of people and thus not used to diversity. For this reason, the sudden inflow of “foreigners” in the country was quite a shock for citizens of BiH. The connected fears, that according to G. could be overcome through interaction, assumed the strongest identity-related connotation when hypotheses about an operation of population replacement started circulating. “It’s identity – M. explained – but imposed by… this fear is created by politicians and the main media broadcasts”. Going even further, M. traced these attitudes and fears back to the political system in general, on which he based a strong argument:

We [BiH citizens] are raised to be racist and fascist, and we are educated to be fascist and racist, in terms of not being open for new experiences, in terms of being rigid, in terms of following our tradition whatever this tradition is.

This argument refers to the importance that the narrative of ethnic division keeps having in BiH, because of its functionality for the political system based on ethnopoltics, which I discussed in the background chapter. According to N., on the contrary, a true intolerance has not yet grown among BiH citizens, to the extent that it will when people on the move will start entering the labour market. In this sense, intolerance and racism are seen as not being caused simply by lack of knowledge of someone, but by seeing this someone as a competitor in the fight over jobs, food, and housing. Similarly, in B.’s opinion, the “othering” of people on the move has not taken place yet, because the citizens of BiH still think the former will eventually head somewhere else. “They haven’t made any claim […] they are literally not taking anything other than space” that is why, for now, there is no competition and the related process of othering. The line dividing identity-based and material fears is quite fine, as references to identity can be employed in order to justify, order or impede the access to resources, especially when they are scarce.

In connection to this last note, the second cluster of fears relates to more material concerns, namely, fears of being taken away what one has gained or could gain in the future. Even though it might be true that competition for resources between citizens of BiH and people on the move has not yet started, the socio-economic situation of BiH will likely not contribute to a smooth sharing of
resources, in case people on the move end up staying. The most telling data about the harsh situation in which BiH citizens are living, are those regarding unemployment. According to UNDP, BiH figures among the worst countries worldwide for its unemployment rate, especially concerning the youth, of which 46.7 percent were unemployed in 2018 (UNDP, 2019b). Data aside, some of my interviewees reported about a broader “impoverishment” of the BiH population, generated by material poverty but also by an existential one, derived from the realization that individuals do not have the power to affect the situation in which they are forced to live. As N. explained:

Because of Dayton and everything... we tried everything, and nothing worked, and people basically gave up. We're powerless, we don't feel that we are positioned to actually change anything, because we know for fact, we had so many initiatives, and things are getting worse, not better. So, in that sense we are not proactively thinking about anything anymore. [...] we basically tolerate politicians, we tolerate bad air, we tolerate the fact that during the summertime we don't have water, and we tolerate these different people, without giving any deeper thought. Because what's the point about thinking?

This feeling was confirmed by B., who added: “we’re just devastated, I think the whole society, that's how I've sort of experienced when I walk the streets in Bosnia [...] everybody is a bit lost”, referring to people on the move and citizens of BiH alike, neither seeing chances for their condition to improve, neither understanding the system in which they currently are. From this material and existential impoverishment, according to N., derives a sort of depression – “depression from beans and cabbage”, as goes a popular song (Bijelo Dugme, 1983) – which leads to a lethargic state, as it was referred to by R., which in a sense impedes even to develop feelings of intolerance. The refugee crisis, as well as the intra-country reconciliation, are pushed down in the list of priorities, on top of which there is, for most people, the daily provision of food. Time will tell whether this situation will eventually make BiH citizens revolt against the political system, or against people on the move. A.’s argument well summarizes this problem:

Bosnians don't want to understand that when migrants will go, the government will still be a problem, will still don't give you your rights. Migrants stay here maybe seven days, maybe one month, maybe three years, but they will go. You will stay here. And trust me, this government doesn't give good treatment to these people, tomorrow will not give you, when you will need. You have to be angry with the government, not with these people.

As L. argued, people’s fears need to be understood and respected. According to A. though, the anger they generate need to be directed towards the truly oppressive subject, which he identifies in the political class.
Besides the frustration that many among my interviewees reported, regarding the decline of solidarity that they perceived among their fellow citizens, there are also signs that solidarity – or, at least, tolerance – is present among the population. Radiosarajevo.ba, presenting the results of a survey conducted at the beginning of 2020, titled that “humanity in Bosnia and Herzegovina has not died” (F. V., 2020, January 18). The survey showed that 87 percent of the sample declared to be helping, in a way or the other, people on the move. This help takes different forms, from buying the paper-tissues that many refugees are selling in the streets, to donating them money or food, to donating to organizations that provide assistance to migrants. BiH citizens are showing solidarity, stresses the author of the article, despite the growing diffusion of fake news and stereotypes by media and on social media (F. V., 2020, January 18). In the next section, I discuss whether the own experience of war and displacement suffered by people of BiH, might have a role in generating this solidarity.

5.3.2. Related Experiences and Their Role or Failure in Generating Solidarity

When I started working on this thesis, I was particularly interested in investigating whether the own experience of war and displacement of the people of BiH, as long as the shared faith of a large part of the population with the great majority of migrants and refugees present in the country today, were having any effect in shaping the response of the citizens to the current situation – in particular, in terms of an enhanced empathy and solidarity. To a certain extent, my informants did not confirm my initial hypotheses, but I find of great interest some of the reflections that emerged. According to most of my interviewees, there is a component of truth in the assumption that the dramatic experience of the war, promoted in the population an enhanced understanding and empathy for the refugees present in the country today. For some of my informants, the experience of war or of having being refugees, had a role in their own decision to get involved, in terms of such experience having shaped their “empathy towards people in need”, as M. explained, or of having made them look at the two experiences – their own, and the one of today’s refugees – as deriving from similar injustices and as being part of the same system of oppression, as B. argued. Most of my informants insisted that this similarity of experiences should be the basis on which BiH citizens base their response to the situation, because of the insights that it can promote on the lives and struggles of today’s refugees. As an example, M. described an interaction he had with a refugee:

One migrant was approaching me: ‘brother, you don’t know how it is to run from your house, not knowing where your family is, what’s happening to your family, you don’t understand the situation.
You don’t know, I’m here alone, my father’s somewhere there, probably killed, really you don’t know
the situation, how I feel’. ‘Ok – M. responded – but my father is still missing for more than 20 years, he was killed as well during the war, and I was a refugee as well, also controlled by armies, I was put in detention camps for five years and I survived ethnic cleansing and war crime’ and then he was looking at me ‘oh, okay my brother’.

When it comes to the broader society, though, most of my interviewees admitted of seeing many people struggling to tap into their own experience, which generate frustration in those who instead actively commit to the cause. For B., it is “disturbing at many different levels, and it sort of feels like being defeated, that somebody is so easily able to manipulate with your own experience”. Similarly, for L., “it’s a bit frustrating, because we haven't expected from our people that they would be so afraid, because once they were in their shoes too”. B. noted with astonishment that on social media, a lot of hate speech against people on the move comes from people belonging to the BiH Diaspora. If on the one hand, she believes that BiH people should recognize the similarity of experiences, on the other hand, she thinks that it should not be forgotten the fact that being “white Europeans” made it easier, for them, to integrate in the societies where they arrived as refugees in the ‘90s. A successful integration which many people, according to B. and others, counterpose with that of today’s migrants and refugees in BiH, whose claims, intentions and interests are unclear to BiH citizens. Others among my informants, like R. and M., mentioned the whiteness-factor as what mostly distinguishes the experience of displacement of BiH people, from that of today’s refugees, who are seen through a racial lens, as B. put it.

Some of my interviewees reflected on the present-day situation, which sees several thousand BiH citizens emigrating each year for so-called “economic reasons” (Kovacevic, 2017, August 8). Even in this case, according to some of my informants, citizens of BiH struggle to see the two migrations – their own, and that of people on the move coming to BiH – as “the same motion”, generated by “the exactly same dream”, in B.’s words. Again, they noted, an understanding of themselves as “good migrants”, in contrast with migrants and refugees present in BiH, helps justifying intolerance against the latter. S. explained this phenomenon in terms of a validation/competition process, for which the common desire to leave BiH leads to a mutual recognition and validation between locals and people on the move, which soon turns into competition, and into a conflict over who has the right to leave. This explanation was confirmed by L., according to whom some locals “are very angry […] because we would also like to go to Germany, but we can’t”.

Another element that I was curious whether it had an impact on solidarity, is the Islamic faith, which a large portion of the population of BiH shares with the majority of migrants and refugees arriving in the country. According to M., many among the refugees that he encountered shared the hope of finding “Muslim brothers” in BiH, which, they hoped, would have guaranteed them a better
treatment than what they experienced in other countries. According to most of my informants, though, this hope wasn’t always fulfilled. When I asked whether they noticed different degrees of solidarity manifested by citizens of BiH adhering to different religions, no one confirmed this hypothesis. All agreed that “there’s no rule”, as A. put it: hate speech could be seen coming from Catholics, Orthodox, and Muslims alike, as well as solidarity. According to my informants, thus, religion does not play a particular role in shaping solidarity responses. On the other hand, at the level of political discourse and practice, the difference is more marked, for example in the case of the authorities of RS – majority Serb-Orthodox – refusing to welcome people on the move in their entity. Nevertheless, even this initial distinction between politicians belonging to different ethnic and religious groups is not that marked anymore, many said, with even Bosniak politicians employing more and more a security narrative. In any case, as B. stressed, this differentiation in political responses cannot be assumed to mirror a distinction in the citizens’ feelings about people on the move, according to their ethnic or religious belonging.

5.3.3. Newcomers in an Already Fragmented Society

Lastly, another theme that I addressed during the interviews was the cohesiveness of the BiH society, 25 years after the end of a war that was portrayed as an ethnic one, but which actually generated and cemented those very ethnic divisions. In particular, I was interested in understanding my informants’ views on how an already fragmented society could deal with the “additional-other” represented by people on the move. Would their presence complicate the reconciliation process? On these questions, my informants had quite different perspectives. Those who saw reconciliation as a crucial task, like N. and R., admitted that ethnic tensions are still present in the country, if not on the rise. They insisted on the fact that their emergence is not bottom-up, but rather top-down, meaning, to be traced back to the Dayton agreement and the political system whose very nature reinforces ethnic divisions. In a system where the whole political game is ethnicity-centred, it is extremely difficult for citizens to pursue change from below. To this difficulty contributes the fact that, as G. pointed out, the war produced “ethnically cleansed” territories, later formalized by the Peace Agreement through the creation of the two entities. As a result, R. explains:

Many people who live especially in small communities, some of them have never met people of other ethnic group, other religions, so some of them are afraid that you know... the "other" is going to do something bad to them. They don't have anything else, they just have that nationalistic rhetoric of the politicians.
Others, among my informants, pushed this argument further, explaining how ethnic constructs, in BiH, are “imaginary constructs”, established, as S. stated, in the context of neoliberal identity-politics. But in this case, she added, the narratives producing such constructs do not find confirmation in the reality of people’s everyday interactions. As she said, “those dynamics do not exist […] in interactions […], but only in these mainstream narratives”. According to B., in this particular situation, people on the move have been inserted in the ethnonationalist narrative that shapes (or, at least, tries to) ethnic relations in BiH, to add fuel to ethnic tensions:

I think the tensions are basically no real tensions in a sense, it's tensions that are brought up whenever the political elite needs those tensions. And the migrants came in at the point where certain political elites needed tensions, so then they came up with this stupid construct of people on the move being Muslims and like ‘the Bosnian politicians invented the migrants to come here and populate Bosnia and then…’ you know, this ridiculous narrative. So, yes, they sort of enclosed [people on the move] within their ethnonational narrative but also, to use for individual political persons gains and games.

The effect of this was visible in the refusal to open reception centres for people on the move in RS. Some, like M., feared that similar political moves could further damage inter-ethnic relations.

According to some of my interviewees, people on the move still have a marginal or no place in narratives around ethnic groups and ethnic relations, so their presence in the BiH context will have no consequence for reconciliation. According to G., reconciliation “is something that we [BiH citizens] have to deal with, with or without migrants, it's still on our to-do list, it’s our pending task”. Still others, reflected on the possibility that the presence of this “additional other” could unify BiH society against a common enemy. Both S. and R. spoke about a similarity, in this sense, between the population of migrants and refugees and the LGBTQ+ community, against which everyone unites. N.’s words are especially explicative:

The fact that we at one point had 60,000 different people, could have been actually a galvanizing moment to have all Bosnian and Herzegovinian, no matter if they are Serb, Croat, Bosniak, or the “others”, to rally around the flag, so some populist politicians could have used this to cement the bond between us, because we are against somebody else. But they didn't of course, and I'm glad they didn't. But it could have happened […] this could actually bring us closer. But no, because everything else in Bosnia, every single topic is divided between different ethnic groups.

According to this disillusioned reading, narratives of inter-ethnic hatred appear to be extremely resistant, even in front of a potential “enemy” that would be much easier to otherize because of its more evident differences. Such enemy, though, would not serve the needs of the political elites,
whose very presence in power is based on the narrative of internal conflict they promote. A conflict so artificial that it requires a lot to convince people about, as B. explained:

if you go to the very everyday lives, there's like nothing that divides us, that's why the religion became so important, because you can't divide us by colour, by language or anything else, yes okay they invented the language later so yeah... they made sure to thick all the boxes, right?

In conclusion, as I discussed in this chapter, the situation that has fallen upon BiH seems far too big and complex for the Balkan state and for its people to deal with. People of BiH live in a country which cannot even provide enough for them, and from which many would like to leave as well, like the migrants and refugees that they see passing through. Regardless the difficulties, though, there seems to be a tired tolerance and compassion winning over sentiments of fear, competition, and hate. Such compassion is manifested in the act of buying a pack of tissues from a refugee selling them in the street, the exchange of a greeting while passing by, or the occasional donation of a pita. According to B., showing humanity towards people on the move “is a question of the Bosnian society really being the best of itself […] an opportunity to find ourselves”. I have the impression that if Bosnians and Herzegovinians had power over the decisions that are been taken in their name by their representatives, or – without even pretending to consult them –, by the international actors operating in their country, the response would be a much more humane one.
6. Conclusion

In this work, I attempted to develop an analysis of the current situation in BiH, which has become, over the last two and a half years, a migrant and refugee hotspot at the gate of the EU. Situational analysis (Clarke, 2005) guided my approach to the situation and to the actors involved in it. The analysis, then, was strongly informed by the theorization of the EU security-informed approach to irregular migration, and of the related migration management approach based on externalization and multilevelling. This was the main lens through which I investigated the topic of my research, and that led me to elaborate an explanation of how the situation emerged and is maintained. On the other hand, the interviews that I conducted provided me with an extremely valuable look at the situation “from below”, meaning, from the points of view of the people actively engaging in it, those experiencing its consequences in an immediate way. As I have shown, the two levels are far from being detached and independent from one another. Actors positioned “on the ground”, as most of my informants are, developed an elaborate understanding and awareness of how things function at the “upper levels”. Such awareness, though, is coupled with a frustration generated by a feeling of powerlessness. Such powerlessness comes from the awareness of being situated at the periphery: geographical, and of worth, in terms of how much their demands are valued at the decision table. The governance of migration performed in BiH, is multileveled in the sense that many actors intervene in it. Participation in this governance, though, does not mean equal possibility of affect the situation for the different actors involved. The relationships between them, the varying degrees of power and independency with which they operate, and the different influence that their choices and actions have on the resulting situation, are what render the situation unique. In this work, I attempted not only to expose the actors involved in the situation and their specific roles, but most importantly, I paid attention to the positions that each of them occupies and to the resources and power that are tied to each position. In summary, I placed the EU with its strategy to curb irregular migration in third countries at the highest level, because of the role it had in generating the crisis in BiH, by sealing its external border and impeding the access of people on the move. The position that the EU occupies, makes it the only actor that could solve the situation in BiH, by reaching an intra-EU agreement on redistributions to welcome and integrate people on the move now stuck in the Balkan country. In strong connection with the EU there is IOM, that the former employs to carry out its strategy in BiH. IOM is involved both in the reception and accommodation of people on the move, and in assisting BiH to enhance its capacity to implement border control. The strong position that IOM occupies in the management of the situation, comes with several problems. First of all, being an international organization and thus a non-state actor, it cannot be held accountable
in regard to its activity, because it is not committed to answer to the public. Secondly, it allows the EU – of which it implements the migration policy – to escape accountability for actions that, in the end, benefit it. The BiH state was caught unprepared to deal with the situation. Deeply dysfunctional and fragmented, it was not able to generate a cohesive response because of the complicated and fragmented structure of its levels of governance. Such dysfunctionality legitimized the intervention of the EU through IOM, which was deemed more reliable than the Bosnian state to manage the resources the EU was providing. On the other hand, BiH had to comply with the EU strategy because of the ties that connect the two, related to the promise of membership and to the conditionalities that come with it. When it comes to the governance from below, two groups appear: civil society, and independent activists. The former group struggles to engage because of lack of resources, and when it engages it sometimes fails to raise its voice to denounce the system, as independent activists complain. The latter find in their independency the freedom to speak out against the injustices they witness, but also a weakness due to being few, and being “alone against everyone”. A final group, is represented by the citizens of BiH, divided between solidarity and fear, that together with people on the move are, I argue, the main losers of the situation and of the games that are played within it. They will suffer, in fact, of the consequences of an enhanced instability that the current situation is bringing with it, in terms of intra-country fragmentation, and inter-regional frictions. Plus, they do not have a say in the decisions that are being taken concerning what happens in their country (a power that in this case, not even their representatives have). Arguably, one the most problematic aspects of the current situation, is that it represents a further attack to the BiH democracy, which the EU claims to being sustaining, while in reality taking advantage of the condition of instability and fragmentation to enact its strategy to curb irregular migration. This short summary of the analysis that was presented in this thesis, also answers my initial research questions, which guided my investigation into the role, strategies, and challenges of each of the actors discussed, and into how they shape and affect each other.

With the analysis, comes also a critique towards the EU’s strategy performed in BiH. As it was shown in this thesis, the EU seems to have contradicting goals concerning BiH and the wider region. These are, on the one hand, the transformation of the region into a migrant and refugee hotspot where people on the move can be dealt with before they reach the EU; on the other hand, the long-standing post-war stabilization goal. The latter, though, appears to have been put aside in recent years, to take advantage of the current instability in order to carry out the externalization strategy. Not only the stabilization goal has been put aside, but the current EU’s strategy has directly caused further internal and regional tensions. It is hard to tell where the line between wanted and unwanted effects of the EU’s approach in BiH can be drawn. The stabilization goal has
been put aside mainly to benefit from the fragility of the political system to carry out the externalization of migration control. But such fragility, on the other hand, prevents BiH from taking on the role of “filter zone” more independently. Moreover, internal instability and conflicting relations among WB countries, would be negative for the EU as well in the long run, since they would mean, in the worst scenario (another war), having a source of undesired migrants at its very gates. The EU’s strategy appears thus extremely short-sighted even considering the EU’s own interests, besides being unjust and even deadly for those suffering its immediate effects.

The analysis of the situation that I presented in this thesis, as Clarke (2005) suggests, does not claim to be exhaustive or definitive. For sure, I followed some reasoning paths while others could have been chosen, and most importantly, the actors on which I chose to concentrate my reflections are not the totality of the actors effectively engaged in the situation. To name one, people on the move themselves, despite being at the very centre of the situation in question, appear only marginally in these pages. As I have already explained in the introduction to this thesis, this choice is not derived from seeing them as agency-less, passive subjects, which of course, they are not. It has been rather a choice that I made to focus on the receiving end of the movement in which they participate.

With this work, I hope I have provided a perspective on the situation in BiH that can be useful to visualize and understand the asymmetrical system in which people and countries are inserted, with the consequences that such asymmetrical relations have both immediately on the ground, but also in the long-term struggle to achieve the stability and democracy that BiH and its citizens are pursuing. Security (as well as rights), either is for everyone, or it is for no one. Accepting that for the perceived security of EU member states and citizens, the security of BiH citizens and people on the move could be sacrificed, besides being morally unjust, will also have long-term consequences for the EU itself.
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