

At the Heart of Fortress Europe

Austria's role in border externalisation policies in the Balkans

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1. Introduction

On 28 September 2020, Ayoub N. and six of his friends were chain pushed back from Austria, to Slovenia, Croatia and back to Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) from where he began his journey to Austria some weeks earlier. Ayoub, like many others, got stuck in between the EU Member States, in the Balkans, for years and this was just another attempt to reach the Schengen Zone. His attempts continued even after this push-back, and, even in July 2022, Ayoub was still in the Balkans, caught inside the Balkan Circuit (Stojić Mitrović et al. 2019), a circular movement inside the region of transit with many loops, involving moving forward and backwards, due to the border violence. While waiting for the chance to try one more time, Ayoub testified about the push-back from Austria:

“ In Bosnia, we were seven friends. We decided to go on a trip from Bosnia to Austria, which took us 22 days on foot. We bought all our necessities and we departed for the border with Croatia. We faced difficulties with the police but escaped them. We spent 17 days in the forests of Croatia. We crossed to Slovenia and didn't face any difficulties. We spent two days in Slovenia and were one step away from the country of Austria. After we crossed the Austrian border, we were close to the Austrian village of Sieldorf. After that, we spotted someone in the woods, and he called the police. After that, they chased us for about two hours. When they caught us, we asked for asylum in different languages. However, they ignored us and mocked us. They told us that we had no right to anything, and they began to talk in their mother tongue. They took away our clothes and arrested us. They took us to the police station. We had faced a lot of difficulties before finally arriving in Austria. But they deported us. We felt the injustice of this, and they broke our hearts. After we were interrogated,

our pictures and personal information were taken by the Austrian police. They mistreated us and did not even give us a glass of water.

Me and my friends were taken to Slovenia, the interpreter there told me that I do not have the right to asylum. I was a minor back then, but I didn't tell her. After that, I spent two days in prison alone by myself. They took my fingerprints and took me back to Croatia. The Croatian police beat me and gave me the deportation paper. After that, they threw me at the Bosnian border. There, I also received beatings from the Croatian border guards. After that, I spent two months in Velika Kladuša. Some friends stood with me.¹

Ayoub and his group's story² is one of thousands of examples of push-backs from the EU. It illustrates the violent and sometimes deadly reality for people on the move who are trapped in the Balkan Circuit. While more than 30 Austrian border police officers³ were involved in the push-back of Ayoub's group at the Styrian-Slovenian border, this study provides a broader mapping of Austrian-based actors, organisations and multilateral cooperation that are heavily involved in EU border externalisation policies far beyond Austrian borders. Since the 'long summer of migration' in 2015 and the sealing of the Balkan Route in 2016, people on the move are trying to make their way to the European Schengen area via BiH. According to Frontex, the Western Balkans⁴ became one of the main migrant routes to Europe.

1 Input by Ayoub N. in the context of the webinar The Normalisation of Pushbacks at the EU Borders

2 A parliamentary request for information raised in connection with the case of Ayoub shed light on numbers of push-backs from Austria. During 2020, 514 persons were turned over to the Slovenian police at the Styrian border, nearly 100 of whom came from insecure countries such as Syria, Iraq, Iran, Somalia, etc.

3 During a court case following the violent push-back of the group, the Austrian police had to provide detailed information about the police operation. The authorities stated that they used the opportunity to train police students on site, initiating what Ayoub and his group tried to prevent, a man hunt that lasted for several hours and ended in a chain push-back.

4 The authors only use the term *Western Balkans* in relation to the term created in the process of EU border externalisation and accession plans of Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. See Stojić Mitrović et al. 2020, 20-22.

Fig. 1: The Balkan route and closures to reduce migration flows to European countries, 2013–2016



Source: UNHCR as published in Arsenijević et al. 2017; own modification

Exactly one year after Ayoub and his group of friends experienced the chain push-back, Austrian Interior Minister, Karl Nehammer, finished the last day of his trip to Kosovo, Albania and Montenegro coordinating joint frameworks to fight what he calls illegal migration, terrorism and organised crime. During the trip, he announced that a ‘Return Conference’ would take place some months later in Vienna. The gathering brought together high-ranking officials from more than 22 countries, together with representatives from EU agencies and other think tanks. The main focus of the event was the support of the Western Balkans states in effective deportation practices through the newly established ‘Joint Coordination Platform against irregular migration’. BiH was mentioned as one of the main partners of the platform and, as stated in the press conference by BiH Security Minister Selmo Cikotić after the event: ‘With the support of the EU and some proactive partners, like Austria, we could move from a crisis situation to migration management.’

How the ‘return mechanisms’ discussed would materialise and on which legal grounds returns of people would take

place is not known to the public. As Austria does not commit to a clear legal framework for freedom of information – but rather to the principle of official secret – activists together with engaged MPs use parliamentary requests to access detailed information about such multilateral agreements. Nevertheless, the answers to such questionnaires are frequently as vague as possible.

In 2021, a parliamentary request for information specifically focused on Austria’s plans to return people to the states of the Western Balkans, while another asked specific questions about the role of BiH. One line of argument used by the interior minister in these documents is to strengthen the fact that Austria is ‘only’ providing good practice, expertise and training, while the country concerned voices specific needs and is, in the end, responsible for ensuring that the human rights of those concerned will be upheld. This is a common rhetorical practice in the context of EU border externalisation policies, with EU countries only providing knowledge and equipment, while ‘accession’ countries in the Balkans have to fulfil the dark side of Europeanisation.

2. The Balkans as a buffer zone

Since the [EU-Turkey agreement](#) in 2016, which sealed already closed borders to the EU, the entire Balkan region was turned into a sort of ‘dumping ground’ for ‘others’, i.e. people the EU’s Member States do not want on their territory. The deal allowed even more surveillance of the route, as well as a greater presence by the different security forces with the aim of preventing people from entering the EU zone. This left them in limbo between the Member States and the Balkans. This approach increased the criminalisation of movement towards Europe, affecting not only the broader attitude of the public towards people on the move, but also the attitude of citizens in the countries along the route.

While in 2015 the media and the officials in the EU and neighbouring countries were talking about ‘refugees’, and people who need help, the [EU-Turkey deal](#) drastically changed these [terminologies](#) in media, public discourse and policy-making. People on the move were presented almost exclusively as economic migrants, involved in crossing borders illegally, and as such were presented as a threat. In general discourse, ‘migrants’ were contrasted with ‘refugees’, and the power to decide on the status of those people was given to states, intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations. In this context, responsibilities were primarily given to the UN International Organisation for Migration (IOM), often supported by states or actors associated with various political groups. This approach has a detrimental effect on the general situation in the region, and fuels hate towards people on the move.

To keep the borders closed, the European Commission (EC) invested billions of Euros, supervised by IOM and similar non-governmental organisations, to stop irregular migrations and introduce new policies. Further, the EC increasingly supported institutions and organisations working on securitisation, which propagate the messages about ‘Fortress Europe’, guarded by strong police who are ready to use force to stop migrations. The violence became nor-

malised at the EU borders, while the Balkan region became a buffer zone where the borders are protected. What happens to people on the move inside of these countries has officially nothing to do with the EU, and all the burden is transferred to local, highly dysfunctional, institutions. At the same time, local authorities justify all their actions, even those that go against the local laws and international practices (like restrictions on freedom of movement or detention of asylum seekers) by stating that they are just following directives, and that all they are doing is in accordance with EU standards or at least under the supervision of international bodies like IOM. These practices include abhorrent living conditions in accommodation centres across the Balkans, deterrence of people from the borders, push-backs and problematic asylum procedures leaving many people with no status and, like Ayoub, stuck in an endless no man’s land.

The role performed by different Balkan states in keeping the EU borders closed, depends on their geographical position, but also on their [position in relation to the EU](#). It is important to stress that the region includes two semi-protectorates – Kosovo and BiH – where the influence of the international community⁵ plays an important role. In both countries, existing legislation, including laws related to migrations, are not only dictated from the outside, but in many cases written by different international organisations, and imposed on the local legislation. Both countries do have a significant presence within the EU institutions, including Special Representatives, but also a military presence.⁶ This role is largely influenced by the EU accession process, which officially opened in 1999 when the EU introduced the [Stabilisation and Association Process \(SAP\)](#). Under the SAP, the Western Balkans states are obliged to follow certain rules of a process eventually leading them to accession. The rules have changed over time, and from country to country. If performing well in following these rules, the countries are given [access to the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance \(IPA\)](#) funds.

5 Plethora of inter-governmental and governmental organisations and foreign diplomatic representatives, who in a different way influence local politics.

6 Peace agreements and the following processes led by the international community include military presence of NATO troops in the field, as well as military presence from different countries as part of stabilisation forces.

This EU influence in the region became even stronger after the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003, which reintroduced the term ‘Western Balkans’. The summit happened at the time when the entire region was still part of the Schengen visa regime,⁷ which imposed strict control over who could enter the Zone and limited time of stay. Back then, significant numbers of people from the region were among people on the move, crossing borders irregularly, or overstaying visas they were issued with:

“ *Progress is dependent on these countries implementing major reforms in areas such as the strengthening of the rule of law, combating organised crime, corruption and illegal migration, and strengthening their administrative capacity in border control and security of documents (Council of the European Union 2003, 16).*

In order to regulate this area, the Summit agreement refers to ‘illegal migration flows’, requesting from all the countries in the region to curb migrations of their own citizens. In exchange, they were offered financial help, as well as the option of joining a visa-free scheme that was suspended in 2009 and 2010 for all except Kosovo. The visa-free scheme enabled citizens of Balkan states to enter the Schengen area without a visa and to stay up to three months, while each country was given an obligation to submit a yearly migration profile, focusing on the movements of its citizens, but also on others crossing their territory. At the same time, the EC kept issuing yearly reports for each of the countries, looking into the fulfilment of requirements, including migration-related issues.

Over the years, various intergovernmental organisations, but also those connected to various individual governments, were involved in assisting the Balkan States in changing their legislation in order to meet the EU’s requirements. The EU institutions, but also individual Member States, were directly involved in the field while providing training, equipment and infrastructure for various security-related agencies, as well as support in the construction of the facilities at the borders or those providing accommodation for asylum seekers. The laws that are introduced, and adopted, are often restrictive when it comes to asylum, while transit through the region in between the EU states

became criminalised, and as such subject to increasing surveillance and fortification of borders.

While the UNHCR has been present in the region for decades as the organisation dealing with refugees and displaced persons, the presence of the International Organisation for Migrations as the organisation in charge of the migration management process has become more visible over the last decade. In 2011, the EU formalised their cooperation with the IOM, and, a year later, together they established ‘external action service strengthen partnership’.

“ *This exchange establishes a new era of strategic collaboration between IOM, the EC and the EEAS on migration, development, humanitarian and human rights issues for the mutual benefit of all stakeholders,*

the IOM Director General explained at the meeting in Geneva. This cooperation increased over time, as well as the EU funding for various programmes implemented by the IOM in the field of the EU ‘buffer zones’.

Besides the EU institutions, various individual member countries are working with the IOM on similar tasks, including Austria, and thousands of people have been repatriated to the region over the years. In this way, the EU transfers competencies to organisations they fund, rather than to local governments, who are perceived as less trustworthy as the countries that are not able to meet all the requirements to become part of the Union. This role has increased since 2015, the year when almost 2 million people transited the Balkans on their way to the EU. Back then, the EU and their partner organisations, together with the local authorities, created the corridor giving priority to people from Syria and Iraq to pass and enter the Schengen Zone. However, the corridor remained open until the winter of 2016, when, one after another, EU countries closed the route, in some cases physically. In some countries, this was accompanied by the introduction of stricter rules and controls. In January of that year, a 4-kilometre-long fence was constructed along the Austrian-Slovenian border, and the army was deployed to send people back. North Macedonia responded by closing its borders and raising the fences, with help from Austria, while Slovenia and Croatia introduced quotas to limit the number of migrants, following the example of other EU Member States. The route became more difficult

⁷ Until today, Kosovo remains part of a strict visa regime, and its citizens do not have freedom of movement inside the EU.

for transit, which led to a greater number of people smugglers, and also increased the prices for the journey. Pushbacks, the act of preventing people from seeking asylum and sending them back to countries outside the EU, death and violence, became an everyday reality.

In 2018, future EU accession of the region was reconfirmed at the summit in Sofia, but more requirements were imposed, including those concerning key areas – security, rule of law and migration. All the countries are, among other things, encouraged to be involved in the work of the Joint Operational Office in Vienna, Task Force Western Balkans, and the Frontex-European Border Coast Guard Agency's *Western Balkans Risk Analysis Network*. The EU introduced the position of Regional European Migration Liaison Officers, along with a number of other positions related to migration management, representing EU institutions or various organisations, like Frontex which has had liaison officers in Belgrade since 2017 and in Albania since 2021. In addition, in 2019, the EU introduced a new position by appointing an expert for migration to work inside the BiH Ministry of Security.

Furthermore, in 2020, the European Commission proposed the *New Pact on Migration and Asylum* defining one of the goals enhancement of the return to the countries of origin of people whose asylum claims were rejected. At the same time, the EC continued encouraging states along the Balkan Route to engage more with the IOM in what was known as a voluntary return process, but also to establish agreements with countries of origin allowing deportation. In 2021, progress reports by the EC mentioned the need to follow directives from the New Pact, noticing that some countries made the effort to engage in these types of agreements.

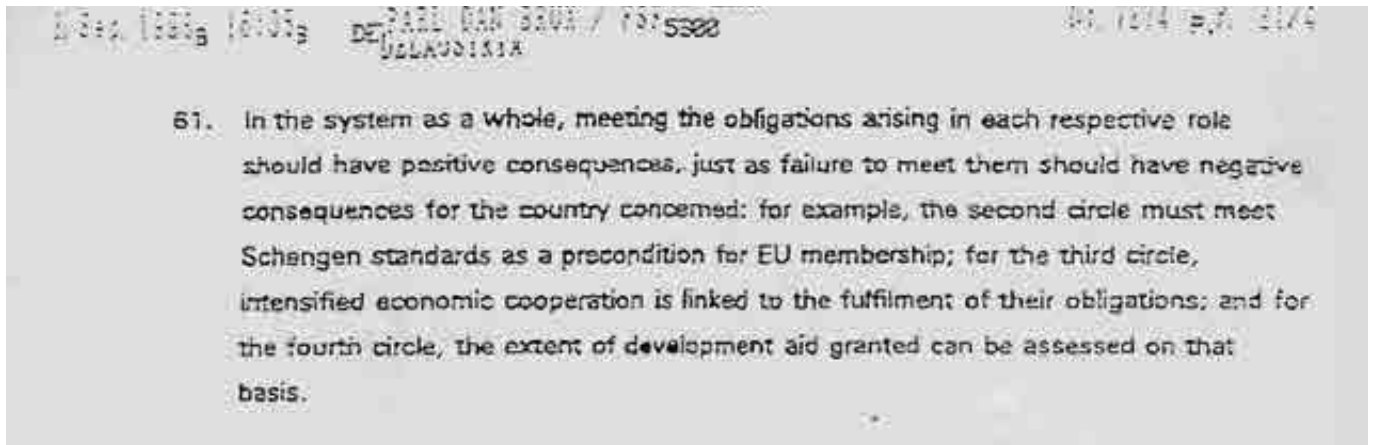
2.1. THE ROLE OF AUSTRIA

While the EU is present in the region through its institutions, and individuals appointed to perform various functions, some Member States, including Austria, became more involved than others. During one of his visits to the region in 2022, Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer, spoke to the media in Belgrade explaining this historical and present connection: 'Since we are all influenced by a number of challenges, including illegal migrations. Austria is a huge investor in Serbia, and this market is interesting for Austria and the EU.'

Historically, many people from the region immigrate to Austria. The number of people from the region, especially refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina, increased in the '90s during the wars following the collapse of Yugoslavia. Back then, Austria was one of the 'frontline' countries where many refugees from the region came, some attempting to stay, some in transit. This sudden increase in the number of people from the region, made Austria – like the rest of Europe – reconsider its migration policies. After the wars, the region turned into an area of weak rule of law, weak and dysfunctional states that were perceived as not able to protect their borders. In the '90s and the beginning of the 2000s, people not only migrated from the region, but also became an active transit route for a number of people coming mainly from Asian countries, triggering the EU, and Austria, to start introducing harsh migration policies.

In July 1998, Austria took over the EU presidency, introducing as the first step the Strategy Document on Immigration and Asylum policies that was sent to the European Council for further discussion. In this document, Austria advocates a unified approach when it comes to migration in the Schengen area, which at that moment was composed of 15 countries, proposing 'Europeanisation of migration policy' while describing the current approach and the structures dealing with migration as 'relatively clumsy'. The document called for more cooperation with 'third states,' in exchange for economic and other benefits. The Strategy envisages that 'Fortress Europe' should be replaced with the 'concentric circles of the migration policy' that will include EU neighbouring countries that 'should be gradually linked into a similar system' that should eventually be similar to the 'first circle,' meaning the Member States, and of the 'transit countries' where the main approach would be to 'eliminate push factors'. The Strategy calls for the 'tightening of the pre-accession strategy... as far as migration policies are concerned'. In addition, it stresses the need for the establishment of agreements with third countries that will allow the return of people whose asylum applications are rejected, as well as the introduction of policies that will deter migration in general. The paper also proposes that the Geneva Convention is outdated and that individual rights should be replaced with 'political offers' of EU membership, or other types of cooperation.

Fig. 2: Austrian Presidency *Strategy Paper on Immigration and Asylum Policy*



Source: *Statewatch.org*

By the end of the year the proposal had been amended twice, but, in the end, it was rejected. A number of non-governmental organisations, including the International Federation for Human Rights, condemned this document due to the harsh language they used, and the restrictive measures proposed in it. Even though never adopted as such, the document remains some kind of guideline, and different measures introduced within it were put in place, especially in Austria that, along with some other Balkan neighbouring countries, became more involved in security-related questions in the region, establishing various organisations and groups that became visibly active in the field, including the Salzburg Forum as one of the key inter-governmental groups.

The role of Austria, and the engagement in the field of security and migration control in the region, was even more visible in 2015. That year, Austria organised a conference that resulted in the Vienna Declaration 'Tackling Jihadism Together'. The participants, including high-ranking EU officials and representatives from the Balkans, connected the threat of terrorism with the need to focus on 'improving border security'. The same year, a joint police action was organised at the border crossing between Serbia and North Macedonia (Preševo – Tabanovci), aimed at 'overseeing issues faced by Europe concerning the migration crisis'. Austria was the only participant not part of the Balkan region.

In February 2016, the 'Managing Migration Together' conference was held in Vienna and concluded by adopting the declaration on migration management in the region and the role of the EU, according to which Austria offered its

assistance to other countries in the form of expertise in the field of migrations. The declaration reads:

“ *Migrants not in need of international protection must be swiftly returned in full respect of their dignity and human rights. Therefore, national and coordinated efforts have to be increased, in particular at the point of first entry into the EU. Technical assistance by Frontex and EASO would be highly welcome. In this context, Austria offered to share its expertise. Further efforts are also needed to speed up the conclusion and implementation of readmission agreements by the EU.*

In July of the same year, at the meeting with regional colleagues in Vienna, Austrian Interior Minister Wolfgang Sobotka stated how migration movements in the Balkans are 'as always, cause for concern', announcing that the route had to be carefully observed in the future. The meeting resulted in an agreement about 'police measures for handling uncontrolled migration in the future'. By the end of 2017, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz wrote an op-ed for *Time* magazine emphasising the role of his government in closing the route across the 'Western Balkans', stating that 'a robust control of the European Union's external borders remains a prerequisite if we want to find sustainable solutions for the migration crisis,' and warning non-Member States that assistance by the EU depended on their cooperation with regard to migration management goals.

In 2018, another meeting was hosted by Austria where the role of Austria in the Western Balkans accession process was stressed, as well as the need to implement more robust

policies when it comes to migrations. Austrian representatives called for the development of the ‘common, comprehensive European policy in this area,’ emphasising that the approach must cover all the migrants’ routes: ‘this means protecting European citizens as well as people who have decided to migrate,’ said Reinhard Eugen Bösch, Chair of the Austrian National Council’s Defence Committee.

The same year, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz was actively engaged in negotiations with representatives from Albania, Serbia, Northern Macedonia and Kosovo about the ‘construction of centres for migrants rejected in the EU,’ especially from Austria. The media quoted Kurz saying that it was necessary to ‘park migrants’ in a ‘less attractive country,’ until they returned to their country of origin. That year, Austria took over the EU rotating presidency from Bulgaria, announcing that ‘strengthening external border controls and combating migration, alongside internal reform of the EU, would be top of Vienna’s agenda’.

In May 2019, Austria chaired another meeting between the ministers of the interior from the region, as well as members of the *Salzburg Forum* and representatives from Germany, Denmark, Greece, Switzerland, the EC, Frontex, Europol, ICMPD, IOM, and the UNHCR. The conference was focused on ‘migration challenges along the eastern Mediterranean/ Western Balkan Route,’ during which cooperation in the field of EU accessions was stressed. In the declaration adopted after the meeting, ministers expressed further cooperation with the region, including efforts made through the *Salzburg Forum*, and the Brdo process among others.

“ *The Ministers will actively promote a common understanding of the significant challenges in the field of migration to prepare inputs for the work of the current and future European Commission,* the declaration concludes.

A further important meeting was held in 2020 in Vienna, from where the message was sent to the region, and the rest of the world, that the EU had to focus on ‘effective management of the EU’s external borders and on returning those who are not entitled to protection before they cross these borders’.

All this time, Austria has remained active in the region, working in different areas related to migrations, and an active donor to the IOM. Back in 2020, the media in Serbia

and Austria published a number of articles related to an alleged agreement between two countries allowing deportations. However, after the existence of the agreement was made public by the media, the Serbian government denied its implementation. On several occasions, Austria provided support for the police in Montenegro, including in May 2021, when Austria offered assistance in the field of education and training of the police, putting the focus on issues related to border management. In addition, Austria helped Montenegro with drafting the new Law on Internal Affairs, and its expertise regarding the establishment of an identification system for migrants and exchange of data. In September, eight police officers were sent to Montenegro with four drones in order to help the local government with border control. According to the media, Minister Nehammer said that, in protecting the borders of Montenegro, the police are protecting the borders of Austria, too. The Montenegrin Minister of the Interior, who met Nehammer, told the media how priorities are the establishment of the electronic system of identification of migrants, more effective asylum procedure, as well as reaching agreements of readmission with the migrants’ countries of origin. ‘Montenegro will in the future be a reliable partner for Austria when it comes to responding to the challenges of illegal migrations,’ Minister Sergej Sekulovć said.

Back in the summer of 2020, the idea of a ‘coordination platform to tackle irregular migration’ was presented for the first time publicly, and it came from Austria. The announcement came after the ministerial meeting organised by Austria in Vienna, with a focus on migrations. According to the announcement,

“ *the new platform will focus on coordinating cooperation in protecting the external borders, returning migrants without a right to asylum, fighting against smuggling, and building faster and more efficient asylum procedures.*

The platform is envisaged as a coordinated approach between various agencies and organisations working from Vienna in the area of migration. In October of that year, Nehammer told the media that his aim was to use more drones in order to discover ‘illegal movement across the borders,’ while emphasising the role of the Western Balkans. Talking about the platform, he explained it as an Austrian idea, stating that the support will come from Germany and

other countries in the EU, while the EC will have an active role in the establishment.

“ *The goal is to unite our knowledge and strength in the field of border protection, return, fight against trafficking and effective asylum procedures. That platform will have its headquarter in Vienna, and we will not establish any new organisation,*

he said for the German newspaper *Die Welt*.

2.2. THE SPECIFIC POSITION OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the influence of the EU and Austria is especially visible due to the specific status of the country, which, over 20 years since the end of the war in 1995, remains a semi-protectorate. The existing structure and power-sharing in BiH allow not only the visible presence but also high influence over the local politics from different international actors.

The country became an important part of the Balkan Route at the end of 2017. From January 2018 until February 2022, 86,384 new arrivals have been recorded in BiH, which is simultaneously a transit country and a country of origin of migration due to many people who are leaving it because of the constant political crisis. The country was not part of the corridor in 2015 and was rarely part of the route for people transiting the Balkans, mostly due to its difficult terrain, being a mountainous area, as well as Albania or Montenegro. Finally, it became part of the route as a consequence of massive push-backs from Hungary, Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania, towards Serbia. More specifically, in November 2017, Croatian border police pushed back to Serbia an Afghan family with many children. During the push-back, a 6-year-old girl, Madina Huseiny, was killed, an act that was denied by the authorities in Zagreb until 2021, when the European Court of Human Rights slammed the Croatian government for the act of push-back that resulted in Madina's death. For people on the move, who were already experiencing brutal push-backs from Croatia, this act signified the moment when the quest for the new route started, and the movement was soon turned towards BiH.

State institutions in BiH were not ready to accept a high number of people, and the EU did not trust them to deal with mixed migration flows. Year after year, different or-

ganisations observe weak rule of law and corruption in BiH. For the EU in 2018, these facts were the explanation for appointing the IOM responsible for managing migration rather than the state institutions. At the same time, tens of thousands of people on the move were scattered around the country, living out in the open, with no or minimum care, without access to the asylum system, healthcare or any other services that the state is obliged to provide. Donations were pouring in for IOM, which, appointed by the EU, took the lead in opening 'temporary accommodation centres' across the country, but also in setting the rules and the path for migration management, becoming the main agency in the country. With backing from the EU, the IOM was empowered to take the lead in different areas that may be associated with mixed migration, including the work of civil society, media, as well as institutions at different levels in BiH. In 2018, IOM organised the conference in Sarajevo with the title 'Facing challenges of mixed migrations in the region'. Participants spoke about the need to protect the EU's borders and to improve communication and cooperation between security structures in the region with the help of the EU. Among the participants was the Slovenian Minister of Internal Affairs who said:

“ *We need to protect the external borders of the EU and of the Schengen Area, and my message is that it is important to cooperate and to secure the stability of the region.*

At the same conference, the Austrian General Director for Public Security, Franz Lang, called for more concrete measures 'aiming to prevent crises like in 2015,' while demanding that the entire Western Balkans region participate and cooperate in that process. He also mentioned the possibility of the establishment of centres for asylum seekers in non-EU countries:

“ *In the context of migration towards the EU, we have been discussing for about three years the possibility of establishing centres outside the EU where asylum seekers will be registered, and their identity established... These centres should be close to the sources of migration in order to stop migrants at the source, and to make a decision regarding whether they can continue.*

While in 2018 and 2019, donations to IOM and its partners came mostly from the EU, in 2020, individual governments started working directly with IOM, including the Austrian

government. At the same time, representatives from Vienna engaged more directly with state institutions, especially the Ministry of Security, providing assistance and expertise in ‘migration management’. By the end of 2020, the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement saying that Austria would dedicate 1 million Euros for accommodation in BiH in order to deal with the ‘migration crisis’. Financing should be processed through the Austrian Development Agency to IOM. Visits by the Austrian Minister of Interior Affairs, Karl Nehammer and contacts with his office became more frequent and more specific. In April 2021, Nehammer met with the Minister of Security of BiH, expressing the readiness of his government to support BiH in building capacities for the future readmission of migrants to their countries of origin. According to the media coverage, the two ministers signed a Memorandum on Strengthening Cooperation in the fight against illegal migration. After the meeting, Minister Selmo Cikotić described Austria to the media as one of the ‘key partners in the fight against many security challenges’: ‘BiH and Austria do have a very special role on the so-called Western Balkan route,’ he said.

In 2021, while Austria continued donating to the IOM, they introduced the *Hilfswerk International* organisation, which has been present in BiH for years and which engages in social and humanitarian issues, as one of the partners when it comes to the implementation of the donations dedicated to ‘mix migrations flow’⁸.

Since 2018, Austria has engaged even more in various issues related to security and border control, often organising meetings and conferences on the topic of migrations. Minister Nehammer became a frequent visitor to the region, promising that his country would help BiH to become a full member of Frontex, the request stated even in the EC progress report for 2021. Throughout that year, different meetings took place in Vienna, including the one where representatives of BiH institutions were taken to visit an asylum centre in Austria and introduced to border control practices at the airport. According to the statement by the

Ministry of Security of BiH after the meeting, the most important topic discussed in the meeting was ‘cooperation in the field of migration, especially in the fight against trafficking of human beings, repatriation of migrants, and strengthening of Bosnian institutions in the area of migration’. In June 2021, two ministers – Cikotić and Nehammer – met again when Austria gave its full support to BiH for the repatriation agreement with Pakistan, which was initiated in November 2020 and signed in January 2021. The same document is praised in the 2021 progress report by the EC, along with the request that similar agreements should be signed with Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Morocco and Egypt.⁹

“ *The aim is to send a message to the countries of origin that it is not worth going such a long way. At the moment, there are about 1,200 people from Pakistan in Bosnia and their aim is to reach Central Europe. They have no chance of getting asylum in the EU,*

Nehammer told the media.

Bearing these statements in mind, it comes as no surprise that, in 2021, Austria, along with the EU and a number of other countries, became one of the most prominent donors to the construction of the Lipa accommodation centre located near Bihać. The centre is built in a similar way to high-security centres in Greece.¹⁰ In both cases, based on the EU requests, centres are built in isolated areas, with no infrastructure and little to no possibility for interaction with the local population. The centre is highly controlled, surrounded by fences, while people stay in containers. Entrance to the centre is highly controlled, and no media or human rights defenders can enter to talk to the people inside.

8 In an interview for the purpose of this study, representatives of HI stressed the lack of trust in the approach of the UN agencies, including the IOM, in BiH, and the need to introduce different ways of cooperation. As pointed out by HI representatives, their work is directed by the needs of local partners.

9 Although the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did have a number of meetings with representatives of these governments, in June 2022, they still did not sign agreements on readmissions.

10 A high-ranking EU official in BiH confirmed that the EU approach in the two countries is similar since both are considered important parts of the route – Greece as the entrance point and BiH as the exit point.

Fig. 3: Lipa camp



Source: International Organisation for Migration (IOM), *Western Balkans*

The entire camp is equipped with cameras, while access to hot water and electricity has remained unstable even after it was officially opened and presented by EU officials as the solution to the accommodation of migrants in BiH; it has been heavily criticised by European civil society. The centre has a capacity of 1,500 places, and it is meant to accommodate single men, unaccompanied children, and families. People are usually brought against their will to Lipa by the BiH Office for Foreigners, accompanied by the local police, with the assistance of IOM and the presence of the Danish Refugee Council, one of the partners of the EU and IOM in BiH, which is responsible for healthcare. Officially, the centre is under the control of state institutions. Nevertheless, most of the employees are employed by IOM and are paid by the EU. Organisations present in the camp have agreements signed with the IOM and SFA, according to which information from the centre is strictly controlled. The centre is not officially considered a place of detention, and people are free to come and go, but they have limited possibility for movement, keeping in mind the remoteness of the area. Inside the centre, both IOM and BiH authorities promote 'voluntary return' as the option for all the people stranded in the country.

3. Austrian actors

Austria's prominent role of lobbying for EU border externalisation has to be analysed (a) under the precondition that 'outsourcing borders is not a solo enterprise' and (b) that it developed in parallel with its internal restrictive restructuring of the migration and asylum system and deportation and detention policies since the 1990s. While an exhaustive overview cannot be provided in the context of this study, it is worth mentioning that, from 1993-2015, Austria implemented a series of harsh reforms of its migration and asylum law that paved the way for a flexible response to and inhumane management (even outside EU collective decisions)¹¹ of future movements of people.

3.1. SALZBURG FORUM

In 2020, EU Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson was invited to give a speech honouring the 20-year anniversary of the *Salzburg Forum*. Highlighting the importance of protecting the 'heart of Europe', she pointed to Schengen as the main pillar of freedom, security and justice within the EU. The strategic priority of her speech was Europe's border regime:

“ *First of all, we must better protect our external borders. We are now upgrading our management, our border security systems and working on interoperability. Soon we will have the most advanced external border management system in the world. Frontex's new standing corps is being set up as we speak. The focus is on implementation of what has*

11 For example, in 2016, Austria passed a bill restricting the number of asylum applications in states of emergencies and started to build a fence along the Slovenian border. Austria also threatened to build a fence along the Italian Brenner border, which outraged Italy.

been agreed. But we will equally need to complete the framework. With new initiatives to digitalise travel documents and visa applications, for instance. With new cooperation with third countries in the area of external border management.

Looking back at the historical development of the platform from a regional cooperation initiative to a powerful instrument for the fortification of Europe allows us to trace the role of informal spaces as core instruments to push for formal decisions on national, bilateral and international levels. In August 2001, Austrian Interior Minister Ernst Strasser (ÖVP) invited his colleagues from Slovakia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland to one of the country's most prestigious tourist destinations in Salzburg to initiate a Central European security partnership called the *Salzburg Forum*. Back then, out of these countries, only Austria was a full member of the European Union, and the multilateral cooperation was designed to prepare the other countries for accession. However, in the years ahead, the *Salzburg Forum* provided a space for 'regional police cooperation as well as regional cooperation on border control, fighting the trafficking of people, asylum and the exchange of opinions on particular EU matters' (Müller 2016, 29). The informal group meetings that took place twice a year developed into different working groups and sub-networks like the Central European Operational Network (CEON), which enabled the members to build 'common police centres, joint patrols in border areas and the exchange of liaison officers' (ibd.). In this context, the multilateral cooperation moved from exchanging information to testing, evaluating and implementing security strategies and institutionalised bilateral cooperation that was designed to function as a role model for other EU Member States (Lavenex 2010).

Bulgaria and Romania joined the forum in 2006 and strengthened the lobbying possibilities for the shared security interests of the Salzburg Group within the European Union. Meetings and conferences of the forum are regularly joined by EU representatives and agencies like FRONTEX, Europol, EASO and ICMPD, and serve as an un-bureaucratic space to directly discuss EU policies. Formally, the *Salzburg Forum* lobbies within the EU Justice and Home Affairs Council, which is responsible for migration, border

management and police cooperation. As highlighted in research on the regional cooperation initiative:

“ *The Salzburg Forum commonly defines joint priorities for action at the EU level in its work programs (18 monthly [sic!]) and its common statements. Moreover, the members of the Salzburg Forum consult each other and aim to coordinate their positions when preparing for EU-level meetings of the JHA Council, COREPER, and the Strategic Committee on Immigration, Frontiers and Asylum (SCIFA). Besides developing joint policy priorities, EU-level coordination has also involved the joint backing of candidates from member countries competing for EU positions in the field of JHA (Müller 2016, 28).*

In a press release following the ten-year anniversary of the *Salzburg Forum* in 2010, Austrian Interior Minister Maria Fekter highlighted the growing strengths of multilateral security cooperation within the EU, reminding Brussels about their number of votes within the Justice and Home Affairs Council and the forum's determination to stop mass migration and crime 'crossing the borders'. Apart from regularly providing the grounds for xenophobic and racist media narratives by its members during press conferences, accessing internal documents or information about future strategies agreed upon by the members of the forum is nearly impossible.¹²

The *Salzburg Forum* also signifies a key component of Austria's international security strategy and defines a common foreign policy strategy on the Western Balkans as a clear priority to defend Austrian and Central European borders and society.

“ *The objective of the 'Salzburg Forum Vision 2020' resolution, adopted in 2010, is to achieve collaboration within the EU and regional cooperation in order to create a Central European security cluster within the EU. It also aims at making a collective contribution to the implementation of the EU strategy for external action, particularly in the Western Balkans and in the eastern neighbourhood (ibd., 13).*

12 Interview with Austrian MP Stephanie Krisper (NEOS), 17 March 2022, also see the parliamentarian request for information about the activities of the Austrian interior ministry in the Western Balkans.

Years before thousands of people from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and other countries moved through the Balkan towards Europe and temporarily suspended the EU Schengen and migration regime in 2015, the *Salzburg Forum* served as a tool to push this specific agenda. As stated in one of the key documents, envisioning the phase between 2010-2020, the cooperation with third countries to fight against 'illegal migration' was one of the main priorities of the forum. Next to the USA and Russia, the Western Balkan states were mentioned as a priority for future network activities.

The new direction of the forum was already prepared by inviting 'a group of friends' to join the multilateral cooperation as non-EU members in 2007. Croatia joined as an observer, while countries like Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro were among the first partners that were invited to join the *Salzburg Forum* and engage in dialogue and security and border control cooperation. What was offered in return by the eight Member States of the Salzburg Forum was the original task of the platform, to support EU accession of these states.

As highlighted by critical migration and border research, being a *friend* in the context of Europeanisation is 'largely conditioned by their implementation of legislation and infrastructure that serves to tame, control and select human mobility towards the EU'. (ibid., 15). In this context, the Salzburg Forum functions as a lobbying forum, not only within the framework of the European Union, and on a regional base between its partners, but also on an often-invisible level that reaches far beyond the EU. Austria did not only play a key role in initiating the forum but was one of its leading Member States. While the forum did not always achieve its strategic goals (Müller 2016, 28), it became a testing ground for fuelling anti-Muslim and anti-migrant sentiments in Europe and became the spearhead for planning and mapping out what will be the dark future of EU border externalisation policies. While the multilateral cooperation was based on debate, dialogue, exchange of ideas and strategic planning, the establishment of its op-

erative tool, the *Joint Coordination Platform*, symbolises another step in cementing the externalisation of border management in the Balkans.

3.2. JOINT COORDINATION PLATFORM

The *Joint Coordination Platform* (JCP) is a network that allows for political and strategic intervention outside the Schengen Area, monitoring and controlling the EU's external borders as well as actions in third countries. Although it was already in the planning for years beforehand, it was inaugurated in Vienna after a 'Return Conference' in 2022. Its office is led by former Frontex Vice-President Berndt Körner and Bohumil Hnidek¹³ and will provide a hinge function for Frontex operations in the Balkans (Monroy 2022). As the agency is not allowed to organise deportations to third countries, in the future it may support deportations from different EU countries to the Balkans and the JCP would coordinate and monitor the rest of the 'local' operations.

The investigative journalist Matthias Monroy further links the Vienna-based think tank ICMPD, led by former Austrian Vice-Chancellor Michael Spindelegger (ÖVP), to the operational implementation of regional return mechanisms for the Balkans. As early as 2020, the JCP started training police officers from Bosnia and Herzegovina in deportations. The training of 50 'return specialists' was recently described by the Austrian Interior Minister Gerhard Karner (ÖVP): 'We help with training, impart standards, but that doesn't change the responsibility that remains in the respective countries. It is about observing all international standards'.

To understand ICMPD's practices on the ground, it is worth reviewing the project descriptions of its Western Balkans and Turkey office in recent years. The long-standing partner of the *Salzburg Forum* implements migration management, border management and capacity building in the Balkans through for example equipping the border police in Kosovo¹⁴ with technical and biometric equipment to register people on the move, supporting the border police in

13 Bohumil Hnidek is a lawyer and the former Director for International Cooperation and EU Affairs to the Ministry of interior of Czechia.

14 MIK: Manage increased influx of migrants in Kosovo, April, March 2021 (Fact Sheet – ICMPD, 4).

Albania¹⁵ with equipment for land border surveillance and maritime border surveillance and control. Capacity building in Albania means in particular providing patrol boats and surveillance vehicles. The regional capacity building projects further cover information campaigns for people in Afghanistan, Iraq and people on the move in the Western Balkans¹⁶. Labelled as protection and support for migrants, ICMPD invests in the enhancement of migrant information systems¹⁷ for authorities in BiH to implement entry control, registration and data collection mechanisms. Especially the ‘electronic biometric residence permit cards’, which should be made available through such projects, point to not only the ground preparation but the implementation of what investigative journalists call ‘extra-European Dublin’, including ‘Balkandac’, a fingerprint database in the Balkans that would allow countries to deport third country nationals to countries with readmission agreements before entering the EU Schengen area.

It is important to highlight that ICMPD has entered the Joint Coordination Platform with years of experience of implementing EU border externalisation projects in Africa and the Middle East and is one of the most profitable institutions in the field of migration management. As a recently published report depicts:

“ (...) the scale of the procurement programs implemented by ICMPD in Tunisia, Morocco, Lebanon and Ghana indicate a shift of ICMPD’s activities regarding its on-the-ground operations in non-European states, most notably in the Mediterranean. Turning the two training facilities, to be established in Nefta and Oued Zarga in Tunisia, into regional training centres, designed to create multiplying effects by providing training for security agencies of neighbouring countries, could potentially serve as yet another blueprint project

for ICMPD and, in case of a successful implementation, further boost the organisation’s fundraising ability and its on-the-ground impact in the entire region (Naceur 2021, 67).

Fig. 4: Karl Nehammer visits the Albanian Border Police during his Western Balkan trip in September 2021



Source: Facebook account Karl Nehammer

3.3. HILFSWERK INTERNATIONAL – FROM HUMANITARIAN AID TO MIGRATION MANAGEMENT

“ ‘Migration is very interesting because nobody wants it in the region.’¹⁸
Stefan Fritz, Managing Director, *Hilfswerk International*

Another active regional partner of the *Joint Coordination Platform* is *Hilfswerk International*. Next to the aforementioned 1 million Euro of Austrian Development Aid that was implemented as an emergency relief fund through IOM in BiH in 2021, the Upper Austrian Federal Govern-

15 EU4SAVEALB: EU Support for the Effective Management of Green and Blue Borders in Albania, February 2019-April 2022 (Fact Sheet – ICMPD, 7-8).

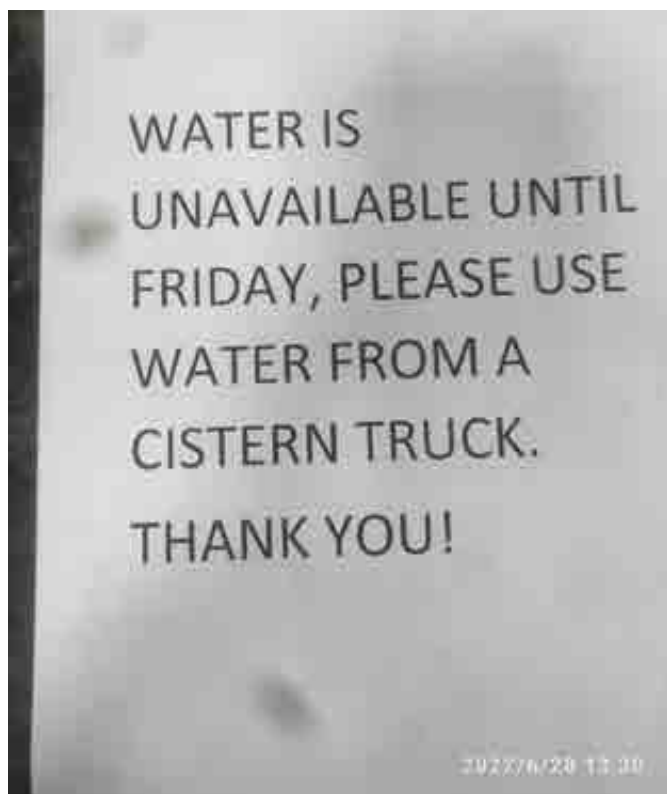
16 IKAM: Information and capacity building on asylum, legal and irregular migration in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Western Balkans, March 2021-March 2022 (Fact Sheet – ICMPD, 9).

17 MiS BiH: Enhancement of Migration Information System for Strengthening Migration, Asylum and Border Management in Bosnia and Herzegovina, November 2021-March 2023 (Fact Sheet – ICMPD, 9-10).

18 Interview conducted with Stefan Fritz, 9 March 2022.

ment donated 100,000 Euro to support the construction of a water system in the Lipa camp.¹⁹ The project was implemented by *Hilfswerk International*, which has been working in the Balkans and especially in BiH as a humanitarian aid organisation since 1996. While the organisation covers a broad range of services in BiH, it recently joined the niche of network and capacity building in the field of ‘migration management’ in BiH, Serbia, North Macedonia, and Montenegro.

Fig. 5: Living conditions of refugees in the Lipa camp



Source: What's App conversations with refugees living in Lipa centre, 2022

The regional office of *Hilfswerk International* is located in Sarajevo and is run by Suzana Jašarević, who – together with Managing Director Stefan Fritz – was interviewed for this study. Stefan Fritz described this relatively new field of work as lucrative, and a sector oriented towards the needs of donors in the region. ‘We are very good listeners; we see the needs of our donors and address them,’ says Fritz. He further elaborated that Austria is a key player in ‘migration management’ in the Balkans, pointing to its proactive role beyond Austrian borders:

“ The Austrian Ministry of the Interior realised that migration is not an issue only for Austria (...). They are much more proactive than the Austrian Ministry of European and International Affairs. It’s funny, but the Ministry of the Interior is working abroad in quite a good manner.²⁰

While other projects of the aid organisation centre support beneficiaries like the elderly, children and vulnerable populations, the niche of ‘migration management’ is tailored to the needs of governments, international institutions and networks. Although both Fritz and Jašarević carefully highlighted that, in the end, capacity development improves the situation for all – also for migrants – their donor-driven approach as well as their assistance in creating powerful instruments for EU border externalisation in the region give a different picture. As a number of critical researchers have investigated, the outsourcing of asylum policies to ‘safe’ third countries is implemented at all costs and the violent expulsion of people on the move continues. Asked about their complicity in human right violations at the border zones, *Hilfswerk International* pointed to the fact that they are not involved in politics and that they are solely a service provider.²¹

19 In mid June 2022, people who are living in Lipa reached out to local volunteers in BiH to inform them that for a week they did not have running water. At that moment, the temperatures were over 40 degrees. Even though less than 400 people were in the camp (capacity is 1,500), people were crammed in containers (six in each) with one small ventilator, while receiving one gallon of water per person a day. Every day, one cister was used. According to the testimony, there was no water in the bathrooms and toilets, either. After the information was published on social media, people in the camp told local volunteers that the employees in the camp threatened some of the residents, warning them that they cannot talk about the camp and telling them that if they do not like the place they could leave.

20 Interview conducted with Stefan Fritz, 9 March 2022.

21 In addition, Fritz highlighted that his organisation applies strict anti-corruption policies, an argument that becomes striking given the fact that *Hilfswerk International* cooperates with the Minister of Security in BiH, who was indicted over corruption. The authors further want to highlight that none of the EU institutions or organisations involved in migration management in BiH expressed their opinion about the fact that the minister of security is indicted. Cikotić is often described as a highly cooperative official. At the moment when BiH institutions are blocked due to the political disputes between ruling parties, for most of the time, the only operational ministries at the state level remain the Ministry of Security and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, both involved in migration-related issues.

Fig. 6: 'Hilfswerk International promotes cooperation of migration-related structures in the Western Balkans'

Balkan Route: better coordination with Austrian aid



Source: [webpage of Hilfswerk International](#)

Hilfswerk International has been included in regional meetings of various actors in the field since 2018,²² but the first project that directly deals with capacity building officially only started in 2021. The shift from aid organisation to an active partner in 'migration management' can be closely followed on the facebook page of the [regional office](#) in Sarajevo that is dominated by updates about events related to the new field of intervention of *Hilfswerk International*.

Funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) and the Federal Ministry of Interior Affairs of Austria, '[Reducing Irregular Migration in the EU by Strengthening the Capacity of Migration-Related Structures in the Western Balkans](#)' is implemented by *Hilfswerk International* in cooperation with the [Association for Help and Development 'HAJDE'](#). As mentioned on the website of the organisation, the [project will](#)

“ support the process of development of the new strategy in the area of migrations and asylum, as well as the Action plan for the period of 2021-2025, a process that is being led by the Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina. These documents will represent an important strategic segment for the development of the entire system of international protection, which will encompass the necessary goals for efficient management in the area of migrations and asylum, ultimately leading to the reduction of irregular migrations to BiH and the EU.

The list of cooperation partners²³ and events that have been organised throughout the project are long and give a glimpse of the intensive preparations for the region to become a buffer zone for Europe's externalisation policies.

22 Interview conducted with Suzana Jašarević, 15 March 2022.

23 As mentioned in a [call for consultants](#) by *Hilfswerk International*: relevant local governance representatives from all levels, i.e. state level BiH Ministry of Security, BiH Ministry of Foreign Affairs, BiH Service for Foreigner's Affairs, BiH Border Police, FBiH Ministry of Internal Affairs, RS Ministry of Internal Affairs, Montenegro Border Police, Montenegro Ministry of Internal Affairs, MARRI, North Macedonia Ministry of Internal Affairs, North Macedonia Border Police, Serbia – Commissariat for migrations and refugees, IOM, UNHCR, and other migration-related institutions and organisations (at least 50 participants).

The main focus has been to mainstream strategies, mechanisms and practices to manifest the grounds of externalisation policies in the Balkans that started back in the early 90s and are laid out in what the European Commission calls a fresh start in migration in 2020.

To give some examples, in June, the project hosted a three-day training and knowledge exchange programme providing support for the working group to fight, control and reduce 'irregular migration'. Simultaneously, *Hilfswerk International* organised several meetings in local cantons in BiH and with border police to discuss joint decision-making and work structures and held a diplomatic dialogue session to discuss mechanisms of international support. While the Minister of Security of BiH, Selmo Cikotić, noted the importance of 'building the Lipa reception centre, which is ongoing, and which will be a model for the functioning of migrant reception centres not only in BiH, but also in the region.' Managing Director Stefan Fritz stressed the determination of his organisation to contribute to the national capacity building: 'We are very grateful for the support we had from the EU and Austria in order to fulfil this role' and that he is 'satisfied that *Hilfswerk International* staff in BiH are cooperating with capable, dynamic, as well as interested and motivated partners in security structures'.

In November 2021, *Hilfswerk International* organised a high-ranking ministerial conference titled Sarajevo Migration Dialogue. Mostly closed to the public,²⁴ the event hosted over 150 participants, including ministers from the region, and representatives of the EU and international organisations.²⁵ The aim of the conference was to exchange experiences in migration management, border control and the future trends and challenges of migration.

Fig. 7: Diplomatic Dialogue Session, Stefan Fritz and Selmo Cikotić



Source: webpage of *Hilfswerk International*, published in June 2021

In autumn 2021, a series of workshops targeted police officers, security structures and social workers in BiH, followed by a regional readmission conference in North Macedonia organised with the *Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative* (MARRI) in the Balkans that consists of Albania, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo. During the conference, Macedonian Interior Minister Kovec stated that

“(r)egional cooperation in the area of readmission is in the interest of the Western Balkans, the European Union, but also in the interest of stranded migrants who have an unpredictable future and are exposed to different risks.

The cooperation with MARRI continued in April 2022 at a three-day meeting in Budva in Montenegro discussing the current state of the regional networks as well as engaging with the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), which presented the New Pact of Migration and Asylum of the European Union to its local partners.

24 Only the opening session of the conference was accessible to the public.

25 Official speakers: Selmo Cikotić, Minister of Security BiH, Oliver Varhelyi, EU Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood, Aleš Hojs, Minister of the Interior of the Republic of Slovenia, Zoran Tegeltija, Chairman of the Council of Ministers BiH, Oliver Spasovski, Minister of the Interior of the Republic of North Macedonia, İsmail Çataklı, Deputy Minister of the Interior of the Republic of Turkey, – Zoran Ničeno, Head of Border Police Directorate Republic of Croatia, Berndt Körner, Director, Joint Coordination Platform, Zoran Miljanić, State Secretary of the Ministry of the Interior of Montenegro, Fabrice Leggeri, Executive Director of FRONTEX, Zoran Galić, Director of Border Police BiH, Péter Szijjártó, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary, Drahošlav Štefánek, Council of Europe, Slobodan Ujčić, Director of Service for Foreigners Affairs, Peter Webinger, Director General for the Migration Ministry of the Interior of Austria.

Hilfswerk International has joined the field of migration management in the Balkans as a player that can offer extensive experience on the ground in BiH. Considering the top-down and dysfunctional approach implemented by IOM in the region, *Hilfswerk International* is an organisation that is closely linked to Austria-based actors and accessible for unbureaucratic and, according to its managing director, working pragmatic solutions. As Regional Director Jašarević stated in an interview about their recent project:

“ (...) we all know, and it is not a secret, that the EU does not want migrants in their territory. And what now? Should we leave them here to suffer or to disappear? It's not possible. They (JCP) can use our infrastructure here if needed, but they also organise some events themselves. They are connecting donors and infrastructure. They know what is going on at a much deeper level than we do. And we are happy to contribute. They are working very hard as far as I know. Very few people and very big plans, but very capable people. I think it will be more visible this year. But it has only just started.²⁶

4. Tools for further investigations

Even at the end of the 1990s, Austria's political landscape paved the way for defining the Western Balkans as a strategic buffer zone for Europe's increasingly restrictive migration and asylum policies. What has been drafted as a strategy to contain migration in 'concentric circles' has been developed into the full-scale implementation of land and sea border zones that legitimate legislation, control, tracking, management of and violence against people moving in circuits while trying to reach the EU Schengen zone.

As this paper shows, Austria took over a key role in building up and networking multilateral stakeholders that enable the fortification of Europe on a diplomatic and informal level while geographies next to and far from Central Europe face the consequences of these policies; BiH is one example. The study can be used as a tool to further investigate Austrian-based and Austrian-initiated organisations, security corporations and individual actors that are heavily involved in violent EU border externalisation from Vienna to Sarajevo and beyond.

The Austrian People's Party – which has held the powerful positions of the Foreign and Interior Ministries since the late 1990s – must be at the forefront of such investigative research as it can be defined as the spearhead of Austria's harsh national and international fight against people on the move. It is important to highlight that it is not only key

figures and political populists of more than three generations within the party who have pushed xenophobic and racist narratives that justified 'ugly pictures' of brutal violence against people on the move towards Europe. The Austrian People's Party also positioned their allies and ex-ministers in influential positions of migration management organisations, e.g. ex-Foreign Minister and Chancellor Michael Spindelegger, who is the current Director of ICMPD, or Othmar Karas, current Vice-President of the European Parliament and president of *Hilfswerk Austria*, as well as the lobbyist and businessman Christian Domany, who is the current President of *Hilfswerk International*.

It is the aim of this study to alert the public in Austria about the role of Austria in preventing migrations to the EU and in keeping the Schengen zone sealed. Therefore, institutions based in Vienna, such as the ICMPD or the *Joint Coordination Platform*, have to be at the forefront of protest against the brutal EU policies of externalisation of people on the move. At the same time, it is of equal importance to stand in solidarity with and highlight the struggles of people who are challenging Fortress Europe daily.

Ayoub N. is not the only one to fight against his push-back in the Austrian administrative court and win his case; another minor from Somalia who was pushed back at the same border by Austrian police one year later, in July 2021,

26 Interview Suzana Jašarević, 15 March 2022.

appealed against the violent return to Slovenia and also faced the police in court and won. Although those concerned did not gain the right to re-enter Austria, these cases are a blow to the practices and mechanisms of border management. They reveal what is sometimes hidden at the heart of Europe and which is already a daily reality at its border zones. As Amin N., who won the last push-back case against the Ministry of the Interior in Austria, stated after the verdict:

“ *This case is not only for myself or my group. This one is for the many other people who suffered and keep suffering from police and border control and violence. This one is for the people who had their hopes demolished. This one is for justice.* ²⁷

27 Interview in the context of the court case with Amin N. by Push-Back Alarm Austria, February 2022.

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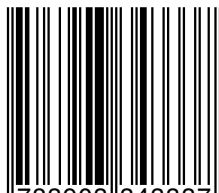
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