

## Idomeni – Gevgelija

*"They drag themselves along serpentine roads across the Balkan mountains, they hope for a new life in Western Europe: On the road with refugee families.*

*Refugees from Africa and from crisis regions in the Middle East try to come to Europe in many different ways. One route goes through the mountains of Greece, Macedonia and Serbia for 250 kilometres – a forced and difficult march. Walking for days is exhausting, and simultaneously full of dangers and disappointments.*

*Many refugees fail, but nevertheless an increasing number of people opt for this route, according to the EU border management agency Frontex. The agency registered 43.000 people on this route in 2014 – twice as many as the year before. In the first two months of 2015 alone, 22.000 refugees came to Hungary through this way."*<sup>1</sup>

Reporters of the news agency AP accompanied 45 refugees from West Africa on their journey for 10 days and nights.

*"The group started in Thessaloniki in Northern Greece in late February. The pictures show their journey full of suffering and pain. It ends with defeat for almost everybody: The majority is apprehended by the border police."*

One of the first and most impressive reports on the Balkanroute comes from Toon Lambrechts: With moving words and good pictures, he reported on the fate of migrants along the route in several episodes in the Belgian magazine *Mondiaal Nieuws*.<sup>2</sup>



<sup>1</sup> <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/fluechtlinge-marschieren-ueber-balkan-route-nach-europa-a-1025740.html#ref=rss>; Given the high number of unregistered migrants, these numbers for the first half of 2015 are just estimates. The UNHCR provides constantly updated statistics about the West Balkan Route, see: <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/country.php?id=502>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.mo.be/en/report/moreporter-undercover-human-trafficking-macedonia>

In June 2015, already 100 to 200 young men a day walked through the Greek border village Idomeni and tried to cross the border to Macedonia.

*"But here you need smugglers again", a refugee explained, "in order to get from Greece to Macedonia – without smugglers you have no chance".*

*"We try to cross the border every night, but the police catch us. The police arrested me and said: Go! Go away from here!", said Imal, a young man from Afghanistan. Nevertheless, he wants to continue trying to cross the border to Macedonia undetected.*

*The small forest behind the village extends across the border into neighbouring Macedonia. In this forest, refugees endure until darkness; then want to go across the border.*

*"The nights are freezing cold. We do not have blankets, we have so many problems", says Moez, a refugee from Afghanistan. The border police fired warning shots and forced the migrants back across the border."<sup>3</sup>*

In Macedonia the route continues along the train tracks by foot – or alternatively with bicycles or taxis – until the border to Serbia. Several lethal accidents occurred on these paths.

The cat-and-mouse game at the Greek-Macedonian border and the presence of smugglers trying to profit from the vulnerability of migrants ended thanks to the law of large numbers on 18 June 2016. In parallel to a similar decision in Serbia, the government authorised the issuance of temporary residence permits for transit through Macedonia. Meanwhile, the number of migrants crossing into Macedonia increased to two thousand per day in July. As the border police was literally pushed to the side, for a few days thousands populated the Macedonian roads and railways.

*"The few Macedonian police officers abandoned any attempt to control the arriving masses, or to at least channel them into ordered procedures", according to a Serbian newspaper. "In principle, every refugee is required to register. Subsequently, migrants receive a transit permit valid for 72 hours. But just as in the 'reception centre' in Presevo in Southern Serbia, most asylum seekers do not wait for this on their way to Western Europe, specifically to Germany, and continue the journey without papers."<sup>4</sup>*

The support for migrants was primarily covered by volunteers, who organised themselves via Facebook and distributed lunch packets in Gevgelija as well as in the border station of Tabanovce at departure times to Serbia. Three trains with a capacity of 450 places were provided per day. *Die Zeit* captured images from the 'Express Train of the Desperate' from Gevgelija to Tabanovce in a sequence of photographs.<sup>5</sup> Until mid-August, a sort of coordination between migrants, the Macedonian border

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.deutschlandfunk.de/fluechtlinge-in-griechenland-ohne-schlepper-hast-du-keine.795.de.html?dram:article\\_id=322641](http://www.deutschlandfunk.de/fluechtlinge-in-griechenland-ohne-schlepper-hast-du-keine.795.de.html?dram:article_id=322641)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/fluechtling-auf-der-balkanroute-mazedonien-kapituliert-vorfluechtlingsansturm-1.2609347>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2015-08/fluechtlinge-mazedonien-zug-fs>

police and the supporting volunteers developed at the border between Idomeni and Gevgelija, and the headlines moved elsewhere.



Image 2: Refugees wait in long lines for the approaching trains in the scorching heat on the platform of Gevgelija. Thousands take the Balkanroute from Syria, Iraq or the African countries via Turkey and Greece to Western Europe. Many cross Macedonia, which is completely overwhelmed with the situation. These refugees' next goal is Serbia, 200 kilometres away. © Ognen Teofilovski / Reuters

Macedonia is a small poor and politically unstable country, constantly patronised by neighbouring Greece and Serbia, with two million inhabitants and 30% of unemployment. The state's foreign policy moves between opportunism and fear. Considering these points, it can be understood that Macedonia is even less than Bulgaria a country where migrants could or would want to stay for a longer period of time. These factors need to be taken into consideration when reflecting upon the events of August 20, which were probably prompted by rushed measures of obedience on the part of the right-wing nationalist government and the fear of bottlenecks in the run-up to Hungary's border closures. Moreover, in July alone, 50.000 migrants arrived on the Greek islands, and their passage through Macedonia was to be expected within days.

On that 20<sup>th</sup> of August, the Macedonian government announced a state of emergency and declared that the "increased pressure" on the southern border made these measures necessary. This was an attempt to stop the movement of refugees abruptly; the state of emergency had been declared in order to be able to deploy additional troops.

*Since yesterday's border closure by Macedonia, thousands of refugees have accumulated in the no-man's-land between Greece and Macedonia. This morning,*

*the Macedonian police shot at them with teargas. According to the Standard, "the situation escalated in Gevgelija in the night to Friday, and a special police officer was stabbed by a migrant. Further details of this case were not known immediately. On Friday morning, the news agency AP published photos showing stones flying in the direction of the police and injured refugees being treated on the other side".<sup>6</sup>*

The border closure could not be maintained for more than three days. The pressure on the barriers was too large, and the use of firearms would have had unpredictable and negative political consequences. The NZZ wrote:

### **"Chaotic scenes**

*Afterwards, chaotic scenes unfolded close to the border town of Gevgelija. Groups of refugees who had suffered in the border zone for up to three days without sufficient provisions, tried to break through the police cordons. The police used tear gas and fired stun grenades into the crowd. Local media reported on the injured, emphasising that numerous refugees were dehydrated. Afterwards, heavy rain began to fall. According to Macedonian accounts, most of the refugees are from Syria, followed by Afghanistan and Iraq as countries of origin. In the course of the weekend, the police lowered the barriers and allowed refugees to take trains to the Serbian border. Neither Macedonia nor Serbia are the people's destination country. Both are only transit countries, which people want to traverse as quickly as possible. In contrast to Serbia, which quickly constructed minimal infrastructure in reaction to the situation, the Macedonian state has only responded slowly and done very little to deal with the emergency. Only now have the authorities begun to construct a reception centre in Gevgelija.<sup>7</sup>*

The government's plan to regain control of the border in a kind of openly fought field battle failed miserably. Instead, August 23 marks one of the major breakthroughs on the Balkanroute. The *Guardian* describes the scene of the breakthrough:

### **"Migrants overwhelm security forces at Macedonia border**

*Riot police remain but fail to slow passage of migrants crossing from Greece on way through Balkans to western Europe:*

*Hundreds of migrants have crossed unhindered from Greece into Macedonia after overwhelmed security forces appeared to abandon a bid to stem their flow through the Balkans to western Europe following days of chaos and confrontation.*

*Riot police remained, but did little to slow the passage of a steady flow of migrants on Sunday, many of them refugees from the Syrian war and other conflicts in the Middle East, a Reuters reporter at the scene said.*

*Macedonia declared a state of emergency on Thursday and sealed its southern frontier to migrants arriving at a rate of 2,000 a day en route to Serbia then Hungary and the EU's borderless Schengen zone. This led to desperate scenes at the*

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<sup>6</sup> <http://ffm-online.org/2015/08/21/mazedonien-polizei-schiesst-mit-traenengas-auf-fluechtlinge/>,  
[http://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2015/08/21/news/immigrati\\_polizia\\_macedone\\_usa\\_lacrimogeni\\_a\\_con\\_fine\\_grecia-121333322/](http://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2015/08/21/news/immigrati_polizia_macedone_usa_lacrimogeni_a_con_fine_grecia-121333322/)

<sup>7</sup> <http://ffm-online.org/2015/08/21/mazedonien-polizei-schiesst-mit-traenengas-auf-fluechtlinge/>,  
[http://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2015/08/21/news/immigrati\\_polizia\\_macedone\\_usa\\_lacrimogeni\\_a\\_con\\_fine\\_grecia-121333322/](http://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2015/08/21/news/immigrati_polizia_macedone_usa_lacrimogeni_a_con_fine_grecia-121333322/)

*border, as adults and children slept under open skies with little access to food or water.*

*Saying they would ration access, riot police used teargas and stun grenades to drive back crowds, but they were overwhelmed on Saturday by several thousand people who tore through police lines or ran through nearby fields.*

*The state eventually laid on extra trains, and buses arrived from across the country to take the migrants swiftly north to Serbia on the next step of their journey.<sup>8</sup>*

The breakthrough was enabled by the firm determination of the migrants, but the fact that the Macedonian border police could not beat families for days under the scrutiny of the world press also played a role. Greece, itself interested in exporting socially explosive issues, contributed by organizing buses transporting people to the border to their unloved neighbor every day. Another factor that induced the Macedonian government to reopen the border was the comparatively tolerant policy of the Serbian government. The above-cited NZZ-report continues:

*"While Macedonia received refugees with teargas, in Serbia the Defense Minister travelled to Presevo to announce the construction of an additional camp. In a self-promoting advertisement action, he was filmed carrying the backpack of the small Syrian boy Ahmed. This might be political kitsch, but also contributes to the still relatively positive societal attitudes towards refugees in Serbia. The willingness to help of parts of the population is remarkable. Especially the spontaneously formed citizen groups – more than the NGOs waiting for donations – are providing nutrition and clothes in the parks of Belgrade and organise games with the children. "People are exhausted, but they know that the worst part is over – only a few hundred kilometers are missing", says Gordan Paunovic, an activist who has been organizing private relief efforts for months. Paunovic backs an acceleration of the transit of refugees through Macedonia and Serbia. The two countries should work together to transport refugees coming from the EU member state Greece directly to the Hungarian EU border. This is unlikely to be viable, given that Serbia and Macedonia are EU accession candidates and do not want to ruin the relationship with Brussels."*

Henceforth, the Macedonian government had to choose: Either follow the example of Hungary and construct a massive fence, or tolerate the transit through its territory and perhaps even helping to make it smoother. The latter option was chosen, and became to a certain extent a trendsetter for a number of other countries along the Balkanroute.<sup>9</sup>

The 8 weeks from August 23 until November 20 were weeks of an accelerated routine in and through Gevgelija. Every day, thousands were channeled into the transit camps, crammed into the trains and passed on to Serbia. A report published on bordermonitoring describes the situation:

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/23/migrants-macedonia-border-greece>

<sup>9</sup> This text is the joint work product of persons involved with moving-europe.org. Passages from Marc Speer's paper, Summer of Migrations, published in Hinterland, <http://www.hinterland-magazin.de/pdf/30-05.pdf>, are used without specific labeling.

*"Following the border closing and the subsequent border opening in the Republic of Macedonia in August, the fight-wing government declared a state of emergency. A new camp was built in Gevgelija (southern Macedonia), far from the city so as to prevent any interaction between the locals and refugees. Ever since, the refugees can only be seen on 2 locations in Macedonia:*

*– refugee point A (camp in Gevgelija, southern Macedonia)*

*– refugee point B (camp in Tabanovce, northern Macedonia)*

*Of course these camps are not really camps but just transit tents and pitiful IKEA structures. There are zero accommodation facilities. There are stones, mud, a lot of barefoot children sleeping on the ground. And unspeakable shame. But also, a lot of strength and resistance, both by refugees and volunteers.*

*The Gevgelija camp has ever since been fenced and the freedom of movement of refugees has been restricted. This is a violation of the refugee legislation in Macedonia, whereby obtaining the registration documents allows you to freely travel in the country for 3 days. In practice, what is happening is that:*

*1) refugees cross the Greek-Macedonian border and reach the Gevgelija camp within 10 minutes*

*2) they are pushed onto trains (no freedom of choice, they must take the train, as the railway system is state-owned, bus companies are private. On rare occasions, in times of railway station technical issues, the refugees are allowed to take buses. Nota bene: Only the carefully selected buses, so that the government can get a percentage out of it).*

*Once they get on the refugee trains, the train doors are LOCKED so as to prevent the refugees from exiting the train anywhere else and pushed onto Serbia. These are special refugee trains.*

*We, as activists have taken them, in solidarity with our refugee brothers and sisters and were unable to get off until the Serbian border.*

*Once the trains reach Tabanovce, the refugees find yet another desolate place, a far-flung village where volunteers tirelessly wait. Volunteers and civilians in the Gevgelija camp have been facing numerous restrictions since August, one needs to be a member of an NGO to be able to enter the camp and have a special CMC badge (crisis management centre). The camp is fenced and severely militarised – the army, the border police and the special police force of Macedonia are tirelessly patrolling to protect us from the myriads of “terrorists“ flocking into the country. On the other hand, the Tabanovce camp has been much more relaxed, until 2 weeks ago when it was fenced. However, volunteers are still free to move there in practice. It is a bit risky especially for foreign volunteers, as they need a volunteering visa, but many are taking the risk and nothing has happened to them until now. There are serious plans to make Tabanovce as strictly controlled as the Gevgelija camp perhaps by the end of this week.”<sup>10</sup>*

The Macedonian attack on the right to move on 20 August was stopped and overcome. Was it then also the revenge of the Macedonian border security, that made the country willing to attempt the implementation of EU political interests for the second time, by selecting migrants based on national affiliation from November 20 onwards, producing new misery but also resistance?

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<sup>10</sup> <http://balkanroute.bordermonitoring.eu/2015/10/30/macedonia/>