

## Blog

# Italian MEPs' mission to the Bosnia Refugee Camps: on the brink of inhumanity

Irene Chiocchetti



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**On the 29th January, four Italian S&D Members of the European Parliament (Pietro Bartolo, Brando Benifei, Pierfrancesco Majorino and Alessandra Moretti – all belonging to the centre-left wing Partito Democratico) undertook a four-day inspection mission to refugee camps in Bosnia and assessed the situation at the border with Croatia. What they witnessed was shocking and inconceivable. Indeed, it is hard to believe that this is also a reality in Europe.**

The aim of the mission was to evaluate, and possibly denounce, the conditions in which thousands of asylum seekers are forced to live in Bosnia-Herzegovina, on the doorstep of the EU. Since 2018, the EU has donated €89 million in order to alleviate the costs born for the provision of mid-term assistance to refugees, who escaped from wars and persecutions (especially from Afghanistan and Syria) and faced many obstacles through the so-called Balkan Route. According to the principle of non-refoulement enshrined in the UN Geneva Convention and in the European Charter of Fundamental Rights, refugees have the right to ask for asylum in another country, whose authorities have to take charge of the applications and cannot return them, if it is ascertained that their life is at risk in their home country. The host states thus have legal obligations and must ensure protection to the refugees, which, however, is not always respected.

The journey started in Zagreb, where the MEPs visited the Porin Hotel which serves as a reception centre, the only one of its kind in Croatia, where migrants can apply for refugee status. Although journalists are not allowed to access the facilities, the deputies did acknowledge the integrity of the building and ensured that health care services are provided, that children can attend school and that other educational activities are offered according to their age.

On the second day, an unfortunate episode occurred with the Croatian police. On the way to the border with Bosnia, through the Bojna forest, the group was stopped by a dozen armed policemen, although previous agreements were made with local authorities. Neither the involvement of diplomacy nor a message of the President of the European Parliament, David Sassoli, helped to resolve the situation. The MEPs thought that they were stopped in order to prevent exposure of any evidence, which might confirm the episodes of outrageous violence and illegal expulsion repeatedly reported by the media and humanitarian associations. Astonishingly, the Croatian Minister of Home Affairs' considered it as "another provocation to the police". The deputies defined the abuses of Croatian authorities a clear violation of human rights and the rule of law, because, as European citizens they were forbidden to freely move inside the EU, and as representatives of the EU institutions, they were not allowed to carry out their job, which also consists of checking the performance of European agencies, such as Frontex.

Their last visit was to the refugee camps of Lipa, which just one month earlier were devastated by a great fire that left thousands refugees, including children, without proper shelter during the coldest period of the year. In the aftermath of the fire, the EU promptly mobilised an additional



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€3.5 million in humanitarian aid for the whole canton of Una Sana. However, the situation is still dramatic, as witnessed by MEP Bartolo, a first-aid doctor, who has worked for many years on the island of Lampedusa, often the first point of arrival in Europe for African migrants; indeed, he said he was traumatised by such inhumane and degrading conditions. He defined Lipa as a “concentration camp”, where about thousands people are stuck there, living in tents, with no water, electricity, heating nor proper clothes. With it being winter and coupled with a pandemic, it makes the situation even more unsustainable.

In light of their findings, the deputies have reiterated their engagement in changing the European migration policy, in particular the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, proposed by the Commission in September 2020, which as such does not encompass a fair share of responsibility and does not overcome the problems associated to the Dublin Regulation. According to the MEPs, the sponsorship of returns is not the solution, what is needed is a mandatory relocation system that includes widespread reception and humanitarian corridors for children and most vulnerable people. However, within the Council it is well known that some Member States, especially Central and Eastern European countries, will reject any proposals that include relocation quotas. On the other hand, most groups within the European Parliament are determined to introduce a common European asylum mechanism for an equal distribution of responsibility, as well as tackling the critical situation at the EU’s external borders with lasting solutions. In particular, as regards the S&D groups, in order to maintain high collective vigilance, they proposed that all national delegations should periodically go to Lipa and monitor the situation. In addition, they committed to raising awareness among citizens and transmit a clear message to the society: migration concerns us all and requires solidarity and a collective management.



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## Contact

Web: [europeum.org](http://europeum.org)

Prague Office address: Staroměstské náměstí 4/1, 110 00, Praha 1

Tel.: +420 212 246 552

E-mail: [europeum@europeum.org](mailto:europeum@europeum.org)

Brussels Office address: 77, Avenue de la Toison d'Or. B-1060 Brusel, Belgie

Tel: +32 484 14 06 97

E-mail: [brussels@europeum.org](mailto:brussels@europeum.org)

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