

It was real and crazy. A Decade Later

Interview with a Man Who Travelled the Balkan Corridor

Among the hundreds of thousands of people who travelled along the Balkan Corridor in 2015 and 2016, each with their own story, was a young Afghan man from Iran. He is referred to as ZA in the interview.

Seeking safety from an oppressive life, ZA, the son of Afghan refugees, left Iran as a member of a minority group. He arrived in Slovenia and then endured a lengthy and challenging international protection procedure. His claim was eventually successful, and he is now on his way to obtaining citizenship.

We first met in 2017 at Second Home in Rog Autonomous Factory in Ljubljana and reconnected several years later at Info Office, a migrant community space led by the Infokolpa collective. I could partake in his lively and generous personality, mapping adventures and new territories.

He describes the open borders programme that brought him from Greece to Slovenia a decade ago in a positive light, despite the challenging experience. The programme covered migrants' mobility and humanitarian needs, facilitating their swift transfer to Central and Northern Europe. However, the corridor was also a highly controlled environment with regular personal data collection points and limited contact with the local population. It was a time of mixed emotions — hope and a sense of moving forward, but also uncertainty about the future.

His journey took him from the inland of Iran to the Aegean Sea. His first stop in Europe was (probably) the Moria camp on the Greek island of Lesbos, where he was taken after being intercepted by the Greek authorities. He continued to Athens and then travelled through North Macedonia and the western Balkan countries until he reached the Austrian-Slovenian border.

He has been a public voice for migrants' struggles and rights in Slovenia and abroad, has learnt Slovenian, attended school, and worked in various jobs, primarily in the hospitality sector. He currently lives in western Slovenia, near the Italian border.

The interview with ZA was recorded in both Slovenian and English on 6 March and 25 August 2025 in Ljubljana.

Thursday, 6 March 2025

[At the kitchen table, waiting for a friend. That afternoon we open the Info Office community space for the weekly migrant support group in Ljubljana.]

Today's topic is the Balkan Corridor—a decade has passed since it opened and closed, and you arrived in Slovenia. What do you remember from that time?

I am happy to be here. The Balkan Corridor programme was great. It took us from border to border and country to country. But it was not easy. When I arrived, I had travelled 4,000 kilometres. I didn't come by aeroplane directly. It was a different situation—*real* and crazy!

What is most important to me now? I am in Slovenia and I don't want to live for nothing. So, I need to fulfil my requirements. What do I need? What don't I have? For example, I need citizenship. This is my big dream. Then I can finally say: Land of dreams. I went forward and took a risk for the right reasons.

I will work to obtain papers and promote human rights. I am happy to work towards this goal. I believe that I can achieve it. Obtaining citizenship is a significant event if you don't already have it. This is what I like, and that's why I went forward. That is why I said I would go. I didn't even know where Slovenia was!

So, you didn't know you'd end up in Slovenia when you began your journey?

I didn't. In each country along the way from Greece to Slovenia— North Macedonia, Serbia, and Croatia—I had to declare my destination. They also took photos and fingerprints. But everything went well. We had an escort.

They asked us everywhere: 'Where are you going?' We all said, 'Germany, Switzerland, Sweden', because the idea was just to keep going. Then, when we reached the Austrian border, our group stopped in Slovenia.

You arrived at the Slovenian-Austrian border in a group.

How did you get from Croatia to Slovenia?

I arrived by train after we completed the procedure in the tents in Serbia, where they took our pictures and gave us support and clothes, as in every country. Everything was well organised on the Balkan Route from Istanbul. There was food, tickets, trains, ships, and support, as well as medicine. It was a good programme. It motivated us to keep going.

After stopping at the Slovenian–Austrian border, where in Slovenia were you sent? To Postojna¹ or Ljubljana?

To Postojna. At the border, they separated us; some of us went to Lendava². We went to the closed camp in Postojna. I was there for almost 25 days. It was just eating and sleeping. Then the police came with a translator and asked whether we want to stay or go.

How many people were in Postojna at that time?

Initially there were around forty or more; later there were fewer, about sixteen. There was another camp in Lendava. It was interesting. They left one by one. Some people self-deported. Someone committed suicide in Postojna because they didn't want to be sent to another country.

What happened?

It happened in the toilet at night. He was blue. He had used a plastic knife. For two hours, no one knew what was going on. He was sleeping, then he went to the toilet.

A lot happened. When I saw what was going on, I said that I didn't care about Germany or any other country. I want peace and to be here. They welcomed me. Then they sent me to the Vič asylum centre with other guys, where I started the asylum procedure.

The Balkan Corridor was chaotic, too. There were many problems among the migrants. Families were fighting amongst themselves and with others. There was not much solidarity. Everyone was just worried about themselves. Nobody cared about anyone else. I helped others on the way as much as I could, especially in Istanbul.

1 A small town in southwestern Slovenia. – *Interviewer's note*

2 A small town in Slovenia, next to the Hungarian border. – *Interviewer's note*

You arrived to Greece from Turkey by boat. What was that journey like?

Coming to Greece was difficult. We crossed the sea in three small rubber boats. Each boat made four trips, carrying 35 people on board. That makes 420 people in total. The boats set off together in the dark in the morning. The seaside was crazy. We passed Istanbul and the Greek sea and then they caught us.

Who caught you?

The Greek police. In Greece, when they accepted us, they asked if we wanted asylum and to stay. They gave us a paper to go around, and if you liked it, you could ask for asylum. They asked me, and I said, no, thank you. We could decide by ourselves. I think I was first on Lesbos, but I'm not sure.

Lesbos is a Greek island. It is not far from Turkey.

Yes, I was there. A big boat arrived. It could fit a bus. There was a long line of more than 2,500 people. It was crazy! They transferred us from Lesbos to Athens.

How many people were in the Lesbos camp when you were there?

It was like a city with too many people. Around the camp in the jungle was a fence. People were sleeping in tents. Inside, it was a catastrophe. A lot was going on. I stayed there for a few nights.

One night, 12 or 15 cars drove in. I don't know if it was the president. He arrived with an escort – can you imagine how big the camp was? He spoke to people and asked about the situation and what was going on inside. The next morning, they opened the door and said, 'Let's go,' and we left. They accepted all of us.

Do you know who visited that night?³

No. We could watch, but from afar. The camp was huge, like a stadium, surrounded by a fence. He arrived, talked to people, and took a look at the situation. In the morning, they opened the door. This was because many people had come without any money.

3 We were not able to independently verify who visited the camp. – *Interviewer's note*

What happened after the ferry took you to Athens?

After Athens, we were transferred by bus to a roadside in North Macedonia, close to a petrol station. There was a large white UNHCR tent next to the motorway. It was nice there—there was food and we could sleep in the tent. In Athens, it wasn't easy to sleep. No one slept. One night, we slept in containers.

From North Macedonia, we walked through the jungle with the same group that we had come with from Greece. These were large groups, moving like a train. Although we went into the jungle on foot, we had support. The first tent had clothes, the next ones had tablets and food, and in the final tent they took photos.

What kind of medicine was available?

Medicine, if you had a cold.

It went very fast. They transferred people very quickly. Once we arrived in Serbia, we checked in. Then they sent us by train to Slovenia. We saw the Croatian cities from the train but didn't enter any of them. The train took us directly to the Slovenian–Austrian border, where everyone disembarked. We were asked some questions.

So, from Greece you went to North Macedonia...

And from there to Serbia. We didn't go through Bosnia.

Did you stop in Belgrade?

No. People travelled different routes.

Let me open the map. You can show me your route on the map.

[Opens a digital mapping service on a laptop computer.]

Yes, here is a map —Tehran, Turkey. Then we go north, to Azerbaijan.

Did you enter it?

You can't, you're not allowed.

I'm talking about Turkey now—about Istanbul. We travelled like this—from north to south.

You travelled roughly from northeastern Turkey to the Mediterranean coast?

Yes, exactly.

Greece is here. Serbian border is here—we never went to Belgrade. From Greece through Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia—everything was organised. I'm talking about 'finger time'—fingerprints, photos. That didn't yet exist in Turkey. In Istanbul, they didn't take fingerprints or photos. They took them in Greece, but not in Athens. Greece is, let's say, where integration started. Before that, it wasn't possible.

How did you travel through Turkey?

By car and on foot. First, however, I travelled directly from Tehran to the Turkish border and on to the city of Van. Here is Tabriz in Iran. Here is Van in Turkey.

Were you near Lake Van?

Not exactly the lake, the Van region.

Here, on the north, is Armenia. You can drive from Iran to Armenia without any problems.

The main border crossing is at Tabriz and Urmia⁴—that's where we crossed from Iran to Turkey. From there, we travelled by car and then on foot. Then we reached Istanbul. I was in the city itself, in the centre.

You travelled all the way to Istanbul in a car?

No, first we slept near Van, and the next day we took a bus to Istanbul, which was a long journey, but everything was organised.

Then we travelled along the coast to Izmir. Once you enter the sea there, you are under the jurisdiction of the Greek authorities. If you are in front of Lesbos, the Turkish police will not enter the sea, no matter what happens. It is up to the Greeks to take care of 'their migrants'. It was exactly like that. We arrived by boats. One of them lost its motor. Ours was at the front.

Here is Athens. I stayed there for a couple of nights. We slept in empty shops in the underpasses.

4 Cities in Iran. - *Interviewer's note.*

Monday, 25 August 2025

*[It is late in the evening. We catch up through a video call.
The next day, ZA works a 15-hour shift.]*

What kind of people did you meet when you travelled along the Balkan Route?

I met people from Palestine, Iran—'the great Iran', as we might say—Afghanistan and Syria. There were families and single people of all kinds. Honestly, I met at least seven different nationalities on the Balkan Route. There were many Asians and even Moroccans heading for Spain.

Until Turkey, we were all mixed together, then the turn towards the Balkan Route and Europe came. Initially, no one had a clear plan or idea, but then the Balkan Corridor opened, which was a big event. It was free and provided an escort. No problem. Welcome!

Do you still keep in touch with anyone you met along the way? Friends on Facebook, maybe?

I am still in touch with one of them. He lives in Germany and has permanent residency. He lives there with his family. The others moved to Sweden, Switzerland, Norway and Finland. I am the only one of my friends who stayed in Slovenia, in Ljubljana.

You passed through many countries. Did you meet any locals along the way?

I passed through six or seven countries. I didn't meet any locals. It was difficult.

They checked everyone individually, from Greece to Germany. They checked everyone's photo, fingerprints, name, and surname. Then they said, 'Good luck.' And that was it.

Who checked you? The police?

Different police forces from different countries, such as Greece, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Then I saw them in Croatia and finally in Slovenia. They all worked in the same way.

Did you meet any volunteers on the route?

No, it was all part of a system in which countries worked together. This means that there were also German police in Greece. They were waiting in rooms for one-to-one interviews with refugees. The refugees could see that they were police officers, but they didn't know which country they were from. When the police asked where you wanted to go and you said Germany, the German police were there for a short, two-minute interview. A policeman and a policewoman showed pictures of fights and attacks and explained the situation in Germany, saying, 'Look, this is how it is.'

How long did it take you to travel the corridor from Greece to Slovenia?

Not long. A couple of nights in Greece, a couple in Athens, a couple in North Macedonia, about forty-eight hours of walking from Serbia to the Croatian border, and then to Slovenia.

This was fast.

It was a very fast transfer. I was waiting in Turkey for a long time.

How long were you in Turkey?

Around 1 week.

How much money did you spend on the route?

Basically, it was free for me and thousands of others.