

Stripped by the Border: Cold Borders, Colder Hearts

There is something about the cold that strips away all illusion. It was winter 2017 when I crossed the border from Turkey to Greece and landed in Thessaloniki. Fourteen of us, huddled together, braving the ice-cold night. Some had been pushed back before – tortured, jailed, and sent back again. No one stayed long in any one place. “We were arrested here last time,” they would say, moving us along like shadows in the night. More than ten hours of walking through freezing rain, numb from the cold but unable to stop. That night felt like it would never end.

Cold has a way of breaking you down. I remember other freezing nights too. As a child in Tehran and Sanandaj, I stood in long lines with my mother for oil, shivering in the snow. But no memory could prepare me for that border. The brutality of it all. Six years have passed since, and yet that night haunts me. I am one of the lucky ones – lucky to no longer be there, waiting in fear and cold. But others are still there, trapped, stripped bare by men who wear uniforms and call themselves protectors.

They don’t just push you back, they strip you down – literally. The Greek border police beat us, took our clothes, money, and phones. Everything. They left people to die on the other side. I’ve seen the photos. Helpless bodies, abandoned. In the middle of it all, these men in power steal everything and send people back into the arms of death.

This isn’t just a story from the past. It is still happening. People call me, begging for help, desperate for some kind of escape. The borders, like invisible chains, trap them in a place where their humanity is erased. It’s 2022, and yet people still risk their lives, crossing borders that treat them like criminals for

wanting to live.

For now, I am writing this, in the hope that someone, somewhere, hears the call and chooses to act. Because this fight is far from over.

The Balkan Route is a well-worn path of human movement, migration, and exile. To speak of it today as a “refugee crisis” obscures the deeper history it reflects – one of conquest, loss, and search for a better life. Borders have been drawn and redrawn, and the people have always found themselves at the mercy of forces beyond their control, whether they are empires or states. Today, the desperation that drives families and individuals to traverse the Balkan Route is no different. The faces of those who cross are the same faces that history has always seen: fleeing violence, starvation, and oppression. This time, the faces belong to Syrians, Afghans, Iraqis, and others displaced by the wreckage of our modern world.

Stanley Cohen’s concept of “moral panic” speaks well to the refugee management crisis unfolding across Europe. Cohen’s framework, introduced in his critical work *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, highlights how society, when faced with phenomena it cannot control, reacts with fear and anxiety. Refugees, in this framework, are cast as the new “folk devils,” symbols of a broader unease about the changes sweeping the continent. The panic over their arrival is not about the individuals themselves. Instead, it’s about the fear of what their presence signifies: the collapse of borders, cultures, and the imagined security that Europe once enjoyed.

Europe’s history is replete with examples of how outsiders have been cast as threats to the social order. From the Romani to the Jewish communities, from colonial subjects to migrants today, the figure of the foreigner has often been manipulated to stir fear. Today, this manipulation takes the form of right-wing political rhetoric and sensationalist media coverage, both of which portray refugees as an existential threat to European identity.

However, the truth is that the refugee crisis is not some unprecedented event, nor is it an invasion. It is simply a continuation of the centuries-old story of human migration, exacerbated by modern geopolitical forces like war, poverty, and climate change. The Balkan Route is not just a geographic journey; it is a symbol of survival, of human resilience in the face of almost unimaginable adversity.

The Balkan Route: A Human Journey

The Balkan Route is a harsh path stretching from the Middle East and South Asia through Turkey, Greece, and the Balkan states before winding its way to the

heart of Europe. The people who undertake this journey are often fleeing war zones, oppressive regimes, and economic devastation. For many, Europe represents the final hope for a future that they've been denied in their home countries. The journey is one of hope but also great peril. Refugees face not only the physical dangers of crossing treacherous landscapes but also the human-made obstacles that stand in their way. Borders along the Balkan Route are heavily patrolled by police and military forces. These borders, drawn by nations that have grown fearful of what lies beyond, are marked by walls and fences that seek to keep the unwanted out. The most notorious of these is Hungary's 2015 fence along its border with Serbia. This fence stands as a symbol of Europe's divided response to the refugee crisis – a mix of fear and reluctant acceptance.

Zygmunt Bauman, a Polish sociologist, identified two primary reactions societies have towards strangers: anthropophagy (the attempt to absorb and assimilate them) and anthropoemy (the desire to expel them). Europe's response to refugees along the Balkan Route has wavered between these two extremes. On the one hand, there is rhetoric about integration and humanitarianism. On the other, there are policies that focus on exclusion – detention centres, deportations, and political barriers. Europe's schizophrenic response to the refugee crisis reveals its deeper anxieties about its identity and future.

Matthew Gibney, a political theorist, referred to this as a “schizophrenic” policy, not simply because of its inconsistency but because it mirrors a deeper contradiction within European societies. Europe has long prided itself on its humanitarian values, enshrined in documents like the 1951 Refugee Convention. But in practice, these values clash with the reality of a Europe that increasingly wants to protect its borders and insulate itself from the rest of the world. The refugee crisis, therefore, challenges the very foundations of the modern European state, which is built on the premise of controlling who enters and who is excluded.

The Fear of the Stranger

Why does the refugee evoke such intense fear in Europe? Part of the answer lies in the nature of the refugee as the “stranger.” Georg Simmel, a German sociologist, once described the stranger as someone physically close but not fully part of the community. They are both familiar and foreign, a figure who disrupts the boundaries of “us” and “them.” Refugees, in this context, represent more than just individuals seeking safety; they symbolize the breakdown of the

social order and the intrusion of the outside into the domestic.

The media has played a crucial role in stoking this fear. Across Europe, from Britain to France, tabloid newspapers and right-wing politicians have painted refugees as a threat to national security, economic stability, and cultural identity. They are portrayed as criminals, opportunists, or terrorists – people who come not to seek asylum but to take advantage of the welfare system or change the cultural fabric of Europe.

This portrayal, however, is not just the result of xenophobia. It stems from deeper anxieties about globalization and the loss of control in a world where borders are increasingly porous. The refugee, in many ways, represents the breakdown of the nation-state itself, the collapse of the idea that countries can neatly control who comes in and who stays out. Refugees are scapegoated for a range of fears – fears about terrorism, unemployment, and cultural loss.

The Human Cost

Amid all the rhetoric and fearmongering, the human cost of the refugee crisis is often forgotten. The people who travel the Balkan Route are not faceless masses; they are individuals with stories, dreams, and lives. They are families torn apart by war, children who have seen more violence than most of us could imagine, men and women who have risked everything in the hope of a better life.

The human cost of the journey along the Balkan Route is immeasurable, felt in both the physical and emotional toll on the refugees who undertake it. This route, which has become a lifeline for those fleeing war and economic ruin, is fraught with peril. Each step forward is met with new risks, and for many, the dream of reaching safety in Europe turns into a nightmare of exploitation, violence, and despair.

One of the elements of the Balkan Route is the smugglers' network that has grown around it. Refugees, many of whom have already lost everything, are forced to rely on smugglers to guide them through treacherous terrains and heavily fortified borders. These smugglers, charge them exorbitant amounts of money for passage. In Turkey, for example, refugees may pay between 100 and 400 euros just to receive specific GPS coordinates that direct them across the border into Bulgaria. The process is repeated at every stage of the journey, with similar payments required to navigate through Bulgaria, Serbia, Bosnia, and Croatia. Each new stretch of the journey demands fresh payments, and for many refugees, this becomes a vicious cycle of financial extortion.

For those who cannot afford the piecemeal payments at every border, a more comprehensive service is available – at an astronomical cost. Some refugees pay around 10,000 euros for a “full package,” where they are escorted by traffickers from one border to the next. This service includes a guide who hands the refugees over to new smugglers after crossing each border, and local drivers who navigate rural, backroad routes to avoid detection by authorities. These services, while ensuring somewhat safer passage, come at the cost of further financial ruin for families already devastated by the hardships of war and displacement.

Bosnia, in particular, has become a focal point in the smuggling operations along the Balkan Route. Its porous borders, combined with a shortage of border guards, make it a preferred route for traffickers. These networks thrive on the vulnerability of refugees, many of whom are forced to trust smugglers as their only means of escape. The sheer scale of the trafficking operations is staggering, and the lack of border security only exacerbates the situation. With nearly a third of Bosnia’s border police set to retire in the coming years, the situation is likely to worsen, making it even easier for traffickers to exploit the route.

The numbers of refugees travelling along the Balkan Route have decreased, due in large part to increased border security and changes in migration trends. However, for those who continue to make the journey, the dangers remain as severe as ever. The tightened borders have not stopped the flow of refugees, but they have forced them to take more dangerous routes, often at the mercy of traffickers who exploit their vulnerability. Each border crossed is a new gamble – another chance to fall victim to theft, assault, or extortion at the hands of those who profit from human suffering.

For the refugees themselves, the costs are not only financial but physical and emotional as well. Many endure harsh conditions, travelling by foot across rugged terrain, being exposed to the elements and often lacking adequate food, water, or medical care. The strain of the journey leaves lasting scars on the body and mind. Camps in Bosnia and camps like the Silos in Trieste have become notorious for their inhumane conditions, where hundreds of migrants live in squalid, overcrowded spaces with little protection from the cold or access to necessities. Illnesses like bronchitis, pneumonia, and severe abscesses from insect and rat bites are common, with many refugees suffering long-term health consequences due to the harsh living conditions. Despite these appalling circumstances, refugees press on, driven by the hope of finding safety and a better life in Europe.

For many, the emotional toll is as great as the physical one. Families are often separated during the journey, with parents and children losing track of one

another in the chaos of border crossings or detention centres. The constant fear of being caught by authorities or exploited by traffickers weighs heavily on those making the journey. Children, in particular, suffer immensely – many have witnessed unspeakable violence and endured trauma that will haunt them for the rest of their lives. Unaccompanied minors, who are especially vulnerable to exploitation, often fall prey to traffickers who use them for forced labour or worse. In Bosnia, some humanitarian organizations have managed to secure the placement of a few unaccompanied minors into care, but for many, the future remains uncertain.

The humanitarian crisis unfolding along the Balkan Route is not an accident. It is the result of deliberate policies designed to deter refugees from entering Europe. Asylum seekers are forced into situations that endanger their lives, all because Europe has chosen to prioritize its borders over human rights. This policy of exclusion comes at a devastating cost: not just to the refugees themselves but to the moral fabric of Europe, which increasingly turns its back on those in need.

The Politics of Exclusion

At the heart of Europe's refugee crisis is a political struggle over identity and belonging. The rise of right-wing populism across the continent has been fuelled by fears of immigration, particularly from non-European countries. In Italy, Giorgia Meloni's government has temporarily suspended the Schengen Treaty, allowing for border controls along its eastern front with Slovenia. This move is justified by concerns over "national security" in the face of increased migration flows along the Balkan Route.

The reality, however, is that these policies are not about security. They are about creating a political narrative that casts migrants as threats to European stability. In this narrative, migrants become symbols of everything that is wrong with the world: terrorism, economic decline, and cultural decay. By closing its borders, Europe believes it can protect itself from these forces. But in reality, these policies only perpetuate the very crises that drive migration in the first place.

In recent years, Albania has become a focal point in Italy's attempts to manage migration flows. An agreement between the two countries to relocate asylum seekers to reception centres in Albania was recently suspended after Albania's Constitutional Court raised concerns abo-

ut its legality. This agreement, which sought to send up to 3,000 people to Albania immediately after their rescue at sea, reflects the broader trend of outsourcing Europe's refugee crisis to non-EU countries. In this way, Europe attempts to push its moral responsibility for refugees beyond its borders, while continuing to benefit from the global systems that create displacement in the first place.

No End in Sight

There is a deep darkness that surrounds the lives of migrants, a darkness that swallows them whole as they move along the Balkan route, carrying with them the weight of their homes, their memories, and their hopes. And within that darkness, a dangerous temptation waits – tranquillity, offered in the form of pills, powerful drugs, handed out too easily and without care for the lives they invade.

These migrants, moving from one border to another, are not just risking their bodies, but their minds, as the unregulated distribution of drugs like Xanax and antidepressants becomes a quiet epidemic in the camps. It is hard enough to survive the journey, harder still to live with the scars it leaves. But now, without asking for it, without even understanding the language of their prescriptions, they are being drawn into a haze of medication. A haze that offers an escape from the violence, the waiting, the shame of their situation – but at what cost?

Prescribing Xanax in Greek camps is ubiquitous, though people had no mental health complaints. They don't ask for help, but the doctors give them pills as if their suffering were a routine matter, something that could be numbed away. And maybe for a moment, it works. Maybe the pain fades, the sleepless nights are quieted, the memories soften. But when the pill wears off, the darkness is still there, waiting. And now it's even harder to face it because the crutch that was supposed to help you stand has become another chain around your ankles.

It is not only the drugs. The whole system is designed to trap these people in a state of dependency, to keep them in a place where they are neither fully alive nor allowed to move forward. As they wait, sometimes for months, for answers that never come, they sit in camps where violence is normal, where their humanity is slowly stripped away. They wait, and they lose themselves, piece by piece.

And the world outside watches, or perhaps it does not. Perhaps it is easier to ignore the migrants, to look away from their suffering, especially when their presence becomes inconvenient. In Bulgaria and Romania, politicians use the

fear of migrants to stir up hatred, creating a false crisis to distract from the real issues. They spread lies about migrants attacking citizens, about chaos coming to their doorsteps, all to make it easier to justify the brutality that happens at the borders.

At the same time, the European Union strengthens its fences, triples its border guards, and turns a blind eye to the violence that keeps these people out. They talk about protecting their borders, but who is protecting the migrants from the beatings, the pushbacks, the broken bones, and the dog bites they endure? The border guards, the authorities, they are not keeping people safe – they are pushing people into deeper despair, into darker corners of the world, where no one is looking.

And still, the numbers are rising. More people are coming, fleeing war, persecution, hunger, and hopelessness. More people are crossing into Bosnia, more people are waiting outside the camps in Serbia, and more people are beaten and turned away in Croatia. The system does not care about their lives. It only cares about the borders they threaten to cross.

Yet the migrants continue, despite the dangers, despite the darkness. They continue because they have no other choice. The world they left behind is gone, and the world in front of them refuses to let them in. All they have is the journey and the pills they are given to numb the pain.

And what does that say about us? About the societies that allow this to happen? About the systems that choose control over compassion? These are not just nameless faces crossing borders. They are human beings, each with a story, a heart, a mind. And we are losing them to the darkness.

The Long Walk Through Shadows

The brothers had never imagined they would be so far from home, walking through strange lands. Kamran was sixteen, just old enough to carry the weight of his younger brother's fears. His brother, Rami, a year younger but more fragile, relied on Kamran in ways that weren't spoken. The Balkans were a maze of unfamiliar faces, jagged mountains, and cities filled with sounds they didn't understand. They had left Afghanistan with little more than a hope that Germany would be different – better. But the route was harder than they had been told.

Rami was the first to notice the pills. In the refugee camps, the men with tired eyes always seemed to be asleep or staring blankly at nothing. In Greece, when they first arrived, they thought it was just exhaustion from the long journey.

But by the time they reached Serbia, Kamran realized it wasn't just tiredness. At the centre in Belgrade, Rami overheard the men talking about pills, handed out without question, even to those who didn't want them. "They make you forget," one said, almost whispering, as if ashamed.

Kamran and Rami had seen the doctors too, but when Kamran was handed a small white pill, he refused. "I don't need this," he said, trying to explain. But the man in the white coat, who didn't speak Farsi, just shook his head and pushed the pill into his hand. Rami looked at his brother's palm. "What is it?" he

asked. Kamran didn't know. He threw it away as soon as they left the office, into the dirt where no one would see.

The camps were full of men lost in themselves. Kamran had heard stories back in Kabul of men who had escaped the war, only to be eaten alive by memories of what they had seen. Maybe that was what the doctors thought they were doing – helping. But no one had asked Kamran what he had seen. They didn't know about the day their house was destroyed, about how their father had died trying to shield them. They didn't know how Rami had screamed for hours afterwards, his face pale with shock, unable to look at their mother's body.

The men in the camps who took the pills no longer screamed. They no longer fought. Maybe they no longer remembered.

One night, in a cold alley outside Sarajevo, Kamran held Rami close, feeling the tremble in his little brother's body. "Don't take anything they give you," Kamran whispered. "Promise me." Rami nodded, his eyes wide with fear, but he stayed silent. They had learned by now that silence was sometimes the only protection they had.

As the weeks passed, they moved closer to the border, closer to the dream of Germany, but the world around them grew harsher. Kamran heard the stories of the Bulgarian police beating migrants, of people being sent back after weeks of waiting. They had escaped brutality in their own country, only to find more along this path.

One morning, they woke to the sound of shouting. Police. Kamran grabbed Rami's arm, pulling him into the shadows of a building. They had become experts at disappearing, slipping through the cracks in this world that didn't want them. But the fear was always there – what if they were caught, pushed back into the camps, where the men handed out pills like candy, trying to dull the edges of the harsh reality?

They didn't talk about it much, but Kamran saw it in his brother's eyes – the slow build of hopelessness, the fear that maybe they wouldn't make it, that maybe the stories about Germany weren't true. That maybe, even if they reached it,

they would still feel the weight of everything they had been running from. But Kamran couldn't let his brother think that. He had to be strong, even when he was unsure.

One evening, in the forests near the border, they met a group of men huddled around a fire. One man, an Afghan like them, spoke softly about the violence on the other side, how the Croatian police had broken his ribs and sent him back. His face was thin, his eyes hollow. Kamran saw the familiar glint of a pill bottle in his hand. The man noticed his stare. "It helps," he said, his voice cracking. "It helps you forget the pain. Just for a while."

Kamran didn't respond. He knew the man wasn't just talking about the broken ribs. He was talking about everything – the war, the loss, the endless walking, the fear that had become part of their blood.

But Kamran didn't want to forget. He didn't want Rami to forget. Forgetting meant losing pieces of themselves, pieces they couldn't afford to lose. They had already lost so much.

The next morning, as the sun rose over the cold, grey landscape, Kamran woke Rami, and they began walking again. They would keep moving. They would not take the pills. They would remember who they were, and where they came from. Because in the end, that was all they had left.