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Montenegro: Germany's Balkan stipends – Asylum and the Rozaje exodus

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Journey to Braunschweig

In May 2015 Halima, a 43 year-old single mother, her sister Emina (47), her brother Hajradin (55), and two of their children (4 and 17) left Montenegro. They did not go as tourists, or to look for work; they left to apply for political asylum in Germany. The fact that 99.8 percent of Montenegrin applications for asylum are rejected in Germany did not deter them. Nor did the German ambassador's public warning shortly before their departure: "You have no right to get asylum and you are losing a lot." They followed in the footsteps of hundreds of thousands of destitute citizens from the Western Balkans who made the same trip in recent years. Hajradin even sold a cow and a calf to pay for it.

The small group boarded a bus in the provincial town of Rozaje in the north of Montenegro – one of its poorest areas. There are many buses a week leaving to Germany from here, some going directly to Hanover, a preferred destination. Tickets for the 30-hour trip cost around 120 euros per person. They crossed the border into the EU with their regular biometric passports; since 2009 Montenegrin citizens do not need a visa to travel to the EU. In Hanover, they changed buses to reach the university town of Braunschweig. There were no traffickers

involved, no illegality and no fraud. In Germany, anybody – whether from Syria, Montenegro or Poland – can file an asylum application at the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees. People are then referred to a reception centre. An official German brochure explains what happens next: “The reception centre provides accommodation for them, takes care of their needs and informs the closest branch of the Federal Office.”

In 2015, many Montenegrins went directly to the Braunschweig reception centre; when an NGO visited it in June it met hundreds of people from northern Montenegro. There, Halima and her relatives filled out a form. They provided personal data and fingerprints. They did not have to explain then why they applied for asylum (they did this in an interview a few weeks later, referring to their desperate economic situation). They spent the first three days in the reception centre, before being taken to a hostel. Two weeks later, they were assigned a house in a village near Bremen. A social worker visited them regularly to see how they were doing; there were bikes provided for them to move around. In late August, they were allocated a house with two floors in a small town closer to a kindergarten for Halima’s daughter. “It is equipped with modern household appliances and there is even a garden,” they told relatives in their village. In addition to free housing and health care, the five receive a total of € 1,290 per month. This is more than five times the monthly salary in the private sector in their municipality. It means even more for them; in their village, almost nobody has a job and many households do not get any social aid.

Leaving Montenegro

Nobody knows exactly how many thousands of people left northern Montenegro in the first half of 2015. When local civic organisations first sounded the alarm early in the year, some tried to count families with luggage getting onto buses to Germany. The national government in Podgorica first denied that anything remarkable was going on. In cafés in Montenegro’s North people began to speculate about the exodus. Some ominously recalled how the Ottomans took away healthy boys in the past: was Germany interested in attracting Montenegrin children as modern-day Janissaries? Others suspected a plot to change the ethnic balance, since most of the people who left were Bosniaks (Muslim Slavs).

In fact, it is not hard to understand why people want to leave Rozaje, Halima’s municipality. The mountainous region in which they live, on the border with Kosovo and Serbia, has been in economic decline for decades. Plots of land are small and, in the absence of irrigation and modern equipment, agriculture is for subsistence only. All industrial plants from the communist period closed down years ago. Halima, her sister and her brother had worked in such companies, producing carpets or furniture, until the firms went bankrupt. Even the bus service from their village to Rozaje town stopped operating. In the villages people grow potatoes and vegetables and raise a few cows, goats and chickens. Today, only five people in Halima’s village have employment – three teachers and two municipal clerks. None of Halima’s close relatives has a job. The present of Halima’s generation looks bleak, and the future bleaker still. And among the generation that reached working age after the collapse of socialism, the majority has never held a regular job and will not obtain any pension upon retirement.

In Rozaje town, the Ibar river, which further downstream famously separates the two halves of ethnically divided Mitrovica in Kosovo, flows lazily past abandoned industrial companies. The largest is “Upper Ibar”: a socialist-era wood processing giant that once employed thousands, then haemorrhaged jobs and finally collapsed due to mismanagement in 2004. The

private sector is tiny. The largest employer in town is a supermarket. There is a meat processing enterprise, a number of small wood processors and one company selling wild berries and mushrooms. The local museum attracts some 800 visitors every year to see its display of old clothes, furniture and weapons. Today, there are 2,600 jobs for the 23,000 inhabitants of Rozaje municipality, and half of these are with the government. Local resources to change things are desperately limited: in 2015, Rozaje's annual municipal budget was around 200 euros per capita – just a tenth of the budget per capita in Budva, a town on the Montenegrin coast. In the municipal building on Marshal Tito Street, the secretary for economic development wistfully remembers socialism: “This was like the United States. Tito was an extraordinary political genius who has no equal in the 20th century.” But Tito, who ruled socialist Yugoslavia from the Second World War until his death, died 35 years ago. For Rozaje today, there is nothing left but nostalgia.

What is certain is that people do not leave Montenegro because of political persecution. The country, with only 620,000 inhabitants, is made up of minorities: Montenegrins, Serbs, Bosniaks, Albanians and Croats. No single ethnic group has a majority. Bosniaks make up roughly a tenth of the population and are politically well represented. The Bosniak Party is a member of the governing coalition and one of the deputy prime ministers is a Bosniak from Rozaje. Montenegro has been negotiating to join the EU since June 2012. In December 2015, Montenegro was invited to join NATO.

And yet, in 2015, more than 4,000 people from Montenegro applied for asylum in the EU. This is part of a wider Balkan trend. The number of asylum seekers from the five Western Balkan countries that obtained visa free travel in 2009/2010 went up from below 10,000 in 2009 to 125,000 in 2015. An ever increasing share of this number went to Germany: 14 percent of the total in 2009, but 85 percent in 2015. Meanwhile, across the EU less than 4 percent of all Western Balkan applicants qualified for international protection in 2014. This rate was 94 percent for Syrians and 52 percent for Afghans.

The number of Montenegrin asylum seekers is a small part of this total, but this is largely because Montenegro itself is so small. In June 2015 tiny Montenegro made it into the top-10 countries of asylum seekers in Germany.

Asylum claims from Montenegro 2008-2015

(Eurostat)

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
In EU28	275	270	405	635	1,260	945	1,845	> 4,000
In Germany	55	95	95	125	395	380	1,270	3,635

The real surprise

What *is* surprising about this trend is that anyone in Germany was surprised; and that German policy makers misdiagnosed the problem and proposed for years obviously unworkable solutions. As soon as the new wave of Balkan asylum seekers hit Germany, politicians argued that this was the fault of the Balkan governments. As early as October 2010, Bavaria's Interior Minister Joachim Herrmann warned: “We will not accept this obvious abuse of our asylum system. If this development continues, the European Union will have to act and to restore the visa requirement for these countries.” Some blamed traffickers and pointed to

organised crime as an explanation. The European Commission suggested that the Western Balkan governments should investigate “facilitators like travel agencies and transport companies”. This, obviously, changed nothing as these companies were only doing their legal business: transporting people with valid papers to the EU. The EU also put in place a “post-visa liberalisation monitoring mechanism”, which mainly produced statistics. None of this made any difference.

A second explanation for the rise in applications was “lack of awareness” of the low chances to be granted asylum in the EU. As a consequence, the Western Balkan governments were told to run public information campaigns on “the rights and obligations of visa free travel.” But the problem was not any lack of information. On the contrary: the more people learned about the experiences of people like Halima, the more were tempted to leave, even if not everyone had as pleasant a stay in Germany.

Enes Falja (50), also from Rozaje, decided in summer 2015 to travel to Braunschweig. A work project he looked forward to fell through, he had no job and Montenegrin friends had told him that they were satisfied in Germany. So he and his family got on a bus. However, due to the sudden increase in the number of asylum seekers during the summer, it took much longer for his family to be allocated housing. The weeks in the reception centre were full of fear – there was theft, violence, even a murder. When his family was finally assigned a nice house (four rooms, two bathrooms, completely furnished) in the small village of Jelmstorf, they did not find happiness either. Here the problem was isolation and boredom: they were the only foreign family in the village, had few contacts, and the next shop was five kilometres away. The loneliness persuaded them to return to Montenegro in time for their children to restart school in September. But, Enes noted, even his family came back with cash savings due to German assistance: “No one comes back with a loss, not even those who only stay for a short time.”

The real reason why a growing number of West Balkan asylum seekers went to Germany in recent years, and not to Austria, the Netherlands, Denmark or Switzerland, was neither crime nor illusions, but the fact that while the German asylum system was generous, the processing of even obviously unfounded asylum claims also took a very long time – around five months for Western Balkan nationals in 2014. With an appeal, the procedure could be extended to an average of 11 months. It had long been obvious what German authorities had to do to end the Balkan exodus. In January 2013 ESI wrote that “there is a clear solution ... to make it less attractive for those who clearly do not qualify for asylum to submit speculative or bogus claims ... The solution to the crisis is obvious. The length of the asylum procedure must be radically reduced.”

In November 2014, Germany declared Serbia, Macedonia and Bosnia safe countries of origin. However, this affected only deadlines for appeal and return *after* a negative first-instance decision. Claimants still faced a wait of several months for their interview and decision, and they kept coming. When, for a short period at the end of 2012, the German authorities had managed to reduce the average length of the asylum procedure to just nine days by prioritising Balkan claims, the numbers dropped to one sixth within weeks. Clearly, the solution was for German authorities to find a way to permanently decide Balkan asylum claims within days, rather than months.

One of Germany’s neighbours did this successfully already in 2012. In Switzerland – not an EU member state, but a Schengen country – the first-instance asylum procedure for Balkan applicants initially also took around four months and the country received a large number of

Western Balkan asylum seekers. Then, in August 2012, the Swiss Federal Office (now State Secretariat) for Migration introduced “special measures” for safe European countries. Asylum seekers from such countries are sent to a reception centre in Basel. There, a special team conducts preliminary interviews within two days of the newcomers’ arrival. Within the next 48 hours, the authorities carry out a full interview and issue a first-instance decision. A rejected claimant has five days to leave Switzerland. In case of an appeal, the Federal Administrative Court issues a decision in 2 to 4 weeks. As soon as these measures took root, the Swiss experienced a drastic drop in applications, from 780 in August to 105 in October 2012. And the numbers have remained low ever since. In 2015, less than 1,500 citizens of Western Balkan countries filed asylum requests in Switzerland.

Too good a German offer

From the perspective of poor villagers and unemployed city dwellers in the Western Balkans, the German asylum system was the equivalent of a paid fellowship: it offered a perfectly legal way for a family to move to Germany for a while and to obtain a stipend many times the family income back home in Rozaje, plus free housing, health care, German language classes and school education for children. If lucky, one could be assigned a nice house. When the fellowship ends, one returns home with savings. Rejected asylum seekers in Germany were entitled to all these benefits even after the expiry of their deadline to leave – until the police would come and deport them (which did not happen systematically). For many across the Western Balkans, it was too good an offer to resist.

Rejected asylum seekers in Germany

(after all legal recourse possibilities were exhausted)

Nationality	Asylum seekers rejected in 2014	Those who left by 30 June 2015	Still in Germany 30 June 2015
Serbia	13,419	7,401	6,018 (45 %)
Macedonia	5,241	2,684	2,557 (49 %)
Bosnia	4,086	2,461	1,625 (40 %)
Kosovo	1,811	732	1,079 (60 %)
Albania	1,657	907	750 (45 %)

2015 brought a new record. In the first ten months of the year 133,260 citizens from the six Western Balkan states applied for asylum in Germany. This accounted for 36 percent of all asylum applications in that period.

As the German asylum system struggled to cope with record numbers of asylum applications, in late 2015 the pressure to reform this system became overwhelming. Then, on 15 October, the German Bundestag changed the asylum procedures, in an attempt to make applications from the Western Balkans less attractive. Montenegro, Albania and Kosovo are now also “safe countries of origin”, like Serbia, Macedonia and Bosnia. Applicants from all these countries have to stay in reception centres for the full length of the proceedings. The reception centres are to replace cash benefits with in-kind allocations. Rejected asylum seekers are to be deported if they do not leave voluntarily. Deportations must no longer be announced in advance.

The impact of these new measures remains to be seen. For now Halima and her relatives remain in Germany, waiting for the day, which will certainly come, when they will have to return to Rozaje. They will then go back to a life without income, in a region where the best lifeline is having a relative working abroad, in a village where going to Germany as an asylum seeker had become one of very few ways to escape and to imagine a different future ... at least for a few months, in some stranger's house in Lower Saxony.

This essay is part of the "Return to Europe Revisited" project supported by ERSTE Foundation. Following the award-winning twelve-part documentary series "Return to Europe" (2008/12), we revisit the countries covered by the series.