

# Bosnia and Herzegovina

## Mixed migration flows: winter 2020–2021 situation

### KEY FIGURES

Approx.

8,700

ASYLUM SEEKERS AND  
MIGRANTS IN BOSNIA  
AND HERZEGOVINA

6,051

IN RECEPTION  
FACILITIES AS AT  
31/12/2020

Approx.

2,700-3,000

ASYLUM SEEKERS AND MI-  
GRANTS ARE NOT IN FOR-  
MAL ACCOMMODATION

Approx.

1,800-2,100

SLEEPING ROUGH,  
MOSTLY IN UNA-SANA  
CANTON

Key figures sources:

UNHCR 31/12/2020; Refugee  
Rights Europe et al. 12/01/2021; UN  
5/01/2021; DRC 12/10/2020

\*Sleeping/living without adequate shelter.

### OVERVIEW

Approximately 2,700–3,000 asylum seekers and migrants are currently residing outside of formal accommodation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This number includes people affected by the closures of Bira camp in Bihać (Una-Sana canton) and Lipa camp, 20km away (UNHCR 31/12/2020; UN 05/01/2021). Most of the people not staying in formal accommodation are located in Una-Sana canton, on the border with Croatia. It hosts three of the seven open reception centres in the country (DRC 12/10/2020; UNHCR accessed 19/01/2020). Migrants wait in Una-Sana before attempting to cross the border into Croatia, thereby entering the EU (Euronews 20/01/2021). Migrants not in formal accommodation are particularly vulnerable to cold weather conditions as they can lack adequate shelter and clothing. The average daily temperature during the month of January in Bihać is typically between -2°C and 5°C (Weather Spark accessed 19/01/2021).

Since 2016 – following the closure of the migrant route through Serbia and Hungary – Bosnia and Herzegovina has been experiencing mixed migration flows of people transiting through the country seeking to reach the EU (Human Rights Watch 11/12/2018). The number of migrants entering Bosnia and Herzegovina increased dramatically in 2018, when 24,000 migrants entered the country, and continued to rise in 2019, with 29,000 reported arrivals (UNHCR 31/12/2018; UNHCR 31/12/2019). 16,150 irregular arrivals were reported in 2020 (UNHCR 31/12/2020).

An increase in humanitarian needs, particularly shelter and non-food items (NFIs), during the winter is a yearly problem, typically resolved by temporary stopgap solutions (Refugee Rights Europe et al. 12/01/2021). Bosnia and Herzegovina's federal structure requires consensus at various political levels, which can lead to local and cantonal-level officials blocking national decisions (Euronews 31/12/2020; Reuters 24/12/2020). Lack of coordination and agreement between the different levels of authority hampers the implementation of a long-term solution to address the humanitarian needs of migrants and asylum seekers (ECRE 08/01/2021).

### KEY PRIORITIES

#### Shelter and winter NFIs:

Assistance is required to provide protection against winter conditions, particularly for those sleeping rough, including warm clothes, sleeping bags, and other basic goods.

#### Health:

Migrants are exposed to COVID-19 and other respiratory infections, skin infections, fever, and frostbite because of exposure to winter conditions and lack of WASH infrastructure (AP 12/01/2021).

#### WASH:

49% of migrants sleeping outside of formal camps who were interviewed in a September 2020 rapid assessment reported having no access to clean water. As the majority of migrants prepare their own food, unsafe water could lead to additional health risks (DRC 12/10/2020).

#### Food:

Those sleeping rough rely on food distributed through humanitarian assistance, or adopt coping strategies such as begging, and carrying out odd jobs to earn money to buy food (DRC 12/10/2020).



## TIMELINE

- On **30 September 2020**, local authorities emptied Bira camp in Bihać (Una-Sana canton) and bussed the 350 migrants and asylum seekers present to Lipa camp 20km away, which was already at its capacity of 1,000 migrants (DW 01/10/2020; IOM 02/10/2020). The closure of Bira camp was linked to public pressure and electoral promises by local authorities in the lead-up to municipal elections on 15 November 2020 (Euronews 31/12/2020). Following the evacuation of Bira camp, Lipa housed around 1,400 people (RFE/RL 28/12/2020). Lipa camp was a temporary solution, set up in April 2020 to alleviate overcrowding in other locations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and was never adapted for winter conditions nor connected to water or electricity (IOM 28/04/2020; IOM 23/12/2020).
- After failing to come to an agreement with authorities on the camp's adaptation to winter conditions, IOM – which assisted authorities in running the camp – and the other humanitarian actors on site pulled out of Lipa camp on **23 December 2020**, effectively closing the facility, citing 'health and safety reasons' (UN 23/12/2020; IOM 23/12/2020; DW 29/12/2020; ERCC 12/12/2020). During the evacuation, a fire – said by officials to have been started by camp residents – damaged or destroyed most of the infrastructure (Euronews 23/12/2020). Of the 1,400 male migrants sheltered there, 900 remained at the site, where they are now staying in heated tents. Around 350 others are 'sleeping rough' (sleeping/living without adequate shelter) in the nearby forest and in abandoned buildings (BBC 08/01/2021; Refugee Rights Europe et al. 12/01/2021).
- Between **29–30 December 2020**, a potential move – organised by state authorities – of the 900 migrants at Lipa camp to a new temporary centre in Bradina village failed, because of political gridlock and protests by parts of the local population against the planned relocation (IOM 30/12/2020; InfoMigrants 30/12/2020).
- On **8 January 2020**, heated tents were constructed by the Bosnian army on the former Lipa site, providing shelter for the 900 migrants who had stayed there (BBC 08/01/2021; Refugee Rights Europe et al. 12/01/2021).
- The government of Bosnia and Herzegovina has stated its intention of turning the former Lipa site into a permanent reception centre, with a connection to the electric grid, and installing WASH infrastructure. Construction had already begun as at **15 January 2021** (Caritas 15/01/2021 update; Euronews 09/01/2021).

An additional 1,500–1,800 people, including women and children, are currently staying outside of reception facilities, mostly in Una-Sana canton, where they are sheltering in makeshift camps, in the forest or in abandoned buildings (UN 05/01/2021; InfoMigrants 30/12/2020).

## OPERATIONAL CONSTRAINTS AND RESPONSE CAPACITY

As most migrants sleeping outside of accommodation centres are located in Una-Sana canton, its population has been the most affected by migration flows through the country. In Bihać, residents have protested against the presence of migrants within the city since 2018, which would explain why local politicians are now promising to keep Bira camp closed (Euronews 31/12/2020; The New Humanitarian 31/10/2018). If reopened, it could shelter up to 1,500 people and would be suitable for winter conditions (ERCC 04/12/2020; Delegation of the European Union to Bosnia and Herzegovina 05/01/2021). The decentralised governance structure in Bosnia and Herzegovina prevents the federal government from imposing the camp's opening on local authorities (Euronews 31/12/2020).

The humanitarian response at Bihać and Lipa camps covered all humanitarian sectors and involved state actors (Service for Foreigners' Affairs, Municipal Centre for Social Welfare, Municipal Public Health Centre, Una-Sana Cantonal Hospital, Asylum Sector, Ministry of Security, and Ministry of Education), UN agencies (IOM, UNHCR, UNICEF, and UNFPA), and NGOs (Vasa Prava BiH, DRC, Save the Children, Médecins du Monde, Jesuit Refugee Service, City of Bihać Red Cross, Caritas, Istituto Pace Sviluppo Innovazione Acli, and Fenix) (UN 31/05/2020).

## LIMITATIONS

This note was written based on a secondary data analysis of information publicly available in reports, press releases, and media articles. As conditions are evolving, it represents a snapshot of the situation at the time of publishing.

The exact number of migrants residing outside of formal accommodation is unclear. UNHCR estimates that the figure is between 1,900–2,700 people (UNHCR 31/12/2020). A September 2020 rapid assessment by the DRC observed up to 3,500 people residing outside of reception centres (DRC 12/10/2020).