

Passage Through the Balkans

PHOTO ESSAY BY ALESSANDRO PENSO

In 2015, thousands of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants, including children, took up the long journey through the Balkans in the hope of finding safety in Europe. The movement of people on the Balkans route has put the European political stability around the issue of asylum application and reception at risk. The situation prompted Amnesty International to declare in July that “Serbia and Macedonia have become a sink for the overflow of refugees and migrants that nobody in the EU seems willing to receive.” Hungary, with its anti-immigration policies, has invested more than 100 million euros in blocking entry of refugees and migrants on the Balkans route. In mid-September Hungary completed a razor-wire fence along its border with Serbia and introduced strict border-control measures prohibiting illegal entrance to the country. In so doing, Hungary set off a domino effect which led thousands of people shift towards the Serbian border with Croatia in a desperate search for another way into the heart of Europe. However, Croatia also struggled to deal with the flows, and Europe was once again faced with its inability to find a solution and safe passage for thousands of people fleeing war and persecution.

These images were taken on September 15, 2015, on the Balkans route and as Hungary closed its border to the refugees.

ALESSANDRO PENSO is a photographer deeply committed to matters of social concern. In recent years he has focused on immigration across the Mediterranean. His work has won several international awards, including Project Launch Award (2011), Terry O' Neill TAG Award (2012), 1st General News of World Press Photo (2014), Magnum Foundation Emergency Fund (2014), and Burn Emerging Photographer Fund (2014). Alessandro is keenly aware that the difficult social and economic conditions in Mediterranean countries are providing an outlet for the phenomena of cultural closure, xenophobia, and violence; in turn, they represent an insurmountable obstacle to the migrants' enjoyment of even the most basic human rights. In 2012 he witnessed a brutal attack on a group of migrants in Corinth, Greece, during which one young man, Mostafa, was hit by a car. This experience has further motivated Alessandro to continue his work on immigration across the Mediterranean in an effort to raise awareness of xenophobia and to help combat racially-motivated violence. He hopes his work will also help fight the dehumanization and stereotyping of migrants that takes place in public discussion, often in order to score political gains. Alessandro's work has appeared in numerous publications, including *Stern Magazine*, *The Guardian*, *BBC*, *New York Times*, *Businessweek*, *Time Magazine*, *International Herald Tribune*, *Human Rights Watch*, *L'Espresso*, *Internazionale*, *Repubblica*, *Vanity Fair Italia*, and *El Periodico*.









