

Red Cross of Montenegro

Case Study:

**Humanitarian assistance
in reception centres**



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Locations

Bozaj Transit Centre - on the border with Albania (capacity of 60 bed spaces)
Spuz Reception Centre - just outside Podgorica (capacity of 140 bed spaces)

Date established

2017 in Spuz
2020 in Bozaj

Target communities

- Migrants and displaced persons

Services provided

- Information
- Food and Water
- Non-food items (hygiene items)
- First Aid
- Psychosocial First Aid
- Restoring family links
- Safe referrals

Context

Montenegro's location in the Balkans region has established it as a transit country, along the Western Balkan route with migrants typically entering from Albania, before continuing toward Bosnia and Herzegovina or Serbia, with the ultimate intention of reaching the Schengen zone.

According to data published by the IOM, there were 4,987 recorded arrivals of migrants entering Montenegro in 2023, a 40% reduction from the 8,318 arrivals in 2022. This stands in contrast to a 5% increase in arrivals across all transit countries in South-Eastern Europe in 2023. The reduction in the number of arrivals into Montenegro may be due to a number of factors including increased management of the border.

The vast majority of arrivals register an intent to claim asylum in Montenegro (which gives them 15 days to submit a claim or leave the country), but then continue their journey through Montenegro, most commonly leaving the country after 4-5 days. According to data from the UNHCR, only 144 asylum claims were submitted in 2023, a fraction of the total number of arrivals.

The main nationalities of recorded arrivals in 2023 were Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and Bangladesh, whilst the main nationalities of asylum applicants in 2023 were the Russian Federation, Cuba and Türkiye.

Once migrants have been registered by the authorities they are able to access government managed reception facilities in Bozaj (a small transit centre comprised of mobile container type units close to the border with Albania with 60 bed spaces) and a larger reception centre in Spuz, (a permanent brick building just outside the capital Podgorica with 140 bed spaces). The centre in Spuz is more commonly used to accommodate families and migrants with additional vulnerabilities.

Migrants responding to surveys conducted by the IOM across the Western Balkans in 2023 show that most respondents travelled through Türkiye before crossing into Greece (either by land or sea) or Bulgaria, and then continued their journey across the Balkans towards the European Union. The same surveys indicate that the main intended countries of destination for migrants using the Western Balkan route are Germany and Italy.

Migrants and displaced persons who reach Montenegro after transiting the mountainous terrain along the border with Albania will have faced many dangers along the route and are often in need of urgent humanitarian assistance upon their arrival in Montenegro.

Overview of the service in reception centres

The Red Cross of Montenegro (RCM) have been providing humanitarian assistance in Reception centres in Montenegro since 2017.. The level of resourcing and activity was strengthened in 2022 as part of the [Global Route Based Migration Programme \(GRBMP\)](#). The Red Cross of Montenegro have established mobile teams that currently operate in the two reception/transit centres in Montenegro, one in Bozaj on the border with Albania, and another in Spuz, just outside Podgorica.

The transit centre in Bozaj is used as a temporary centre where migrants are initially registered by the authorities after crossing into Montenegro from Albania. The camp consists of a number of portable container type units, used to accommodate migrants and provide space for organisations to deliver services and store materials. Migrants tend to stay in Bozaj for a short time (normally just to complete the registration process), before continuing their journey across Montenegro.

The reception centre in Spuz is used to accommodate migrants who go on to make a claim for asylum in Montenegro, with asylum seekers staying here for a longer period of time whilst their claims are being processed.

Given the differences between the two reception centres, the needs of migrants differ in each, with the RCM mobile teams reflecting this in their composition.

The mobile team operating in the transit camp in Bozaj is focused on medical needs, comprising of a doctor, two nurses, two field workers and two interpreters. The nurses, field workers and interpreters work in shifts to provide cover 7 days a week from 9am to 6pm, whilst the doctor works 4 hours a day during weekdays.

The mobile team operating in the reception centre in Spuz is focused on social wellbeing and psychosocial support of migrants, comprising of two social-workers.

The mobile team in Bozaj is the only provider of health services in the centre. Once migrants have been registered by the authorities, the mobile team are the first people on hand to meet migrants who are often tired and exhausted after crossing the difficult terrain at the border. The team assess the individual needs of migrants and are able to provide information, food, water, hygiene kits, first aid, psychosocial support as well as access to communication to restore family links. The team also provide referrals to specialist organisations and support the transportation of migrants in need of urgent medical attention to nearest hospital and the transportation of vulnerable persons (children, families, elderly) to the reception centre in Spuz.

The RCM also provides support to migrants through volunteers in two local branches, one in Nikšić (close to the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina) and the other in Rozaje (close to the border with Serbia). The teams provide first aid, food, hygiene parcels, as well as other essential items to migrants making journeys across difficult terrain in the border region. Part of the local branch in Rozaje has recently been refurbished to enable it to operate as a Humanitarian Service Point (HSP) in 2024.



Bozaj transit centre by the border with Albania



Migrants receiving support at Bozaj transit centre

Voices from the field:

"I came all the way from Turkey, passing through difficult paths, until I finally reached Montenegro. After days of walking and struggling, I arrived at the Božaj camp, tired and hungry. The Red Cross workers welcomed me with kindness and gave me a food package, for which I am truly grateful. I hadn't eaten in three days, and even though I still need to wait another 24 hours to be officially registered, that meal brought me some strength and relief. They also gave me a SIM card with internet access, allowing me to contact my parents and let them know I'm safe and currently in Montenegro. Being able to reassure them means so much to me. I'm incredibly grateful for everything they've done—it's a kindness I'll never forget."

Refugee from Iran

"Working for the Red Cross of Montenegro in a camp for refugees is an extraordinary experience. Each day, I am reminded of the resilience and courage of the people I encounter. While the challenges are significant—both for them and for us as RC workers—I feel honored to be part of their journey toward hope and stability. I often feel a mix of emotions: the sadness of hearing their stories, the joy of seeing a child smile despite everything they've been through, and the deep responsibility to offer support in a way that respects their dignity and humanity. This role has not only deepened my compassion but also strengthened my resolve to make a positive impact, however small it may seem.

At the end of each day, despite the emotional weight, I feel grateful for the opportunity to make a difference, to stand with those in need, and to help build a foundation for their future."

Marko Brnovic, RCM Case Worker in Reception Center Bozaj

