

Borders on the Move – From Physical Lines to Sociotechnical Regimes

Povzetek

Meje v gibanju: od fizičnih meja do sociotehničnih režimov

Članek opisuje premik v upravljanju evropskih meja, kjer se statična meja spreminja v fluiden in prožen mejni režim. V njem se množijo in krepijo številne notranje in zunanje meje, pri čemer sodelujejo številni zasebni in javni, evropski in nacionalni akterji, tehnologije in diskurzi. Upravljanje sodobnega mejnega režima se je spremenilo v prostor ustvarjanja pravnih okvirov in kategorij prebivalstva. Razvil se je v čezmejni »industrijski kompleks«, ki se razteza prek samih mejnih območij, z eksternalizacijo evropskega upravljanja migracij pa tudi v sosednje države in celine. V članku so opisane nekatere glavne značilnosti premikajočih se meja: njihova deteritorializacija, privatizacija, eksternalizacija in digitalizacija. Zaključuje se z analizo sodobnega razvoja evropskega mejnega režima v jugovzhodni Evropi in na balkanski poti.

Ključne besede: evropski mejni režim, eksternalizacija, biometrija, digitalizacija, balkanska pot

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Abstract

The article describes the shift in European border management, where a static border is transformed into a fluid and flexible regime with numerous internal and external borders. This new regime involves a myriad of public and private actors, both European and national, along with advanced technologies and diverse discourses. Its administration is increasingly becoming a space for the production of legal frameworks and population categories. This cross-border 'industrial complex' extends beyond the border areas themselves, across the whole of Europe, and, with the externalization of European migration management, to neighbouring countries and continents. The article describes some of the main features of moving borders: their deterritorialisation, privatisation, externalisation, and digitalisation. It concludes with an analysis of contemporary developments of the European border regime in South-East Europe and along the Balkan Route.

Keywords: European Border Regime, externalisation, biometrics, digitalisation, Balkan Route

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Over the last three decades, the EU's attempt to manage global migration has produced a range of new border policies and practices, including a wide range of private and public, European and national actors, technologies and discourses. The core manifestation of this process is the shift from a static border to a fluid and flexible border regime, where numerous internal and external borders multiply and intensify, assuming both physical and legal forms (see Hess, 2012, 2016; Hess and Kasperek, 2017). This regime is evolving into a dynamic panopticon that exerts control over all physical and virtual spaces of mobility. Its effectiveness is bolstered by the participation of actors across various state and social subsystems, from law enforcement agencies to social welfare, health, and education institutions, as well as transport companies and private employers. In this context, both the construction and administration of borders have undergone radical changes. The modern border has evolved into a highly sophisticated and increasingly precise mechanism. Its administration – through the constant issuance and processing of documents, certificates, visas, permits, checkpoints, and zones, as well as the adoption of laws, procedures, practices, and rules – as shifted from being merely an instrument of control and repres-

sion. It is increasingly becoming a space for the production of legal frameworks and population categories, effectively serving as a ‘means of producing relations.’ (see Luhmann, 1982: 237).

Thus, the border regime, increasingly characterised by regulation and management, has become a key instrument for systematically categorising individuals, as it continuously and universally assigns them statuses that determine the scope of their rights within the boundaries of welfare states. It has evolved into a cross-border ‘industrial complex’ that extends beyond the border areas themselves, across the whole of Europe, and, with the externalisation of European migration management, to neighbouring countries and continents. Within this expansive border regime, new hierarchies of citizenship are emerging across all levels of legal regulation, increasingly fragmenting the European political space – and citizenship itself – into various categories of temporary and partial ‘legal’ statuses. This article begins with a description of a migration regime of moving borders: their deterritorialisation, privatisation, externalisation, and digitalisation. It concludes with an analysis of contemporary developments of the European border regime in South East Europe and along the Balkan Route.

Deterritorialisation

The border, traditionally serving as a territorial marker delineating the limits of the nation-state, is undergoing a process of deterritorialisation. Its primary function is shifting from merely separating spaces and restricting mobility, to continuously controlling the spatial distribution of movement. Unlike the ‘closed territoriality’ of modern sovereignty, which created a homogeneous sphere with a single, fixed, immobile, and continuous border, the evolving constitution of European integrations reflects a form of ‘open territoriality’ characterised by a plurality of coexisting temporal and spatial borders (Cuttitta 2006: 36). The border is no longer merely a line marking the boundaries of states; instead, it manifests “wherever the movement of information, people, and goods occurs and is regulated—for example, in cosmopolitan cities” (Balibar, 2002: 71). As borders become increasingly mobile, flexible, immaterial and ubiquitous, the ‘great frontier’ or ‘imperial limes’ that separated the ‘inside’ from the ‘outside’ (Delanty and Rumford, 2005: 188) no longer exists. However, this shift does not imply that space or territory is absent or irrelevant in the conceptualisation of borders, but rather that borders can no longer be confined to a precise space, even if they continuously traverse and shape it. Mobile borders “have not

ceased to produce fixed mechanisms of closure, they have become ‘de-territorialized’ without ceasing to invest in particular spaces” (Mezzadra, 2007).

Privatisation

Cuttitta suggests that to articulate the border regime appropriately, we will need to develop an entirely new cartography of the border, which will help us to distinguish the “material boundaries from immaterial boundaries, boundaries marked on territories, from boundaries imprinted on the persons, lives, choices and destinies of all people.” (Cuttitta, 2006: 29) To describe this new landscape of policies focused on governing borders and controlling the movement of people, Barry employs the metaphor of the ‘migration machine’ (see Barry, 2001). He argues that this metaphor effectively captures the blend of ‘social and technical realities’ within border regimes, which are becoming increasingly computerised and complex and are managed by a growing array of diverse social actors. Border regime consists “not only of high technology but also of politicians, policymakers, civil servants, border officials and military police” (Dijstelbloem, Meijer and Besters, 2011: 9). Surveillance has thus not only spilt over the edges of territorial boundaries but has also permeated the entire social landscape, being adopted by various organisations beyond governments, where “the responsibility for verifying certain types of migrants (education, work, knowledge and talent) is delegated to universities and companies”. Consequently, the migration machine is not only public, “but also in private and professional hands” (Dijstelbloem, Meijer and Besters, 2011: 10–11). It is not fixed to a specific place and its function of surveillance and control focuses on “observation, registration and verification” (Dijstelbloem, Meijer and Besters, 2011: 10). The migration machine is thus increasingly ‘resourceful’ and increasingly takes the form of a ‘smart border’ (see Lyon, 2005).

Externalisation

In the process of EU enlargement, in its ‘neighbourhood policy’, globalisation, intercontinental partnerships, bilateral and multilateral agreements, ‘approximation policies’ and the externalisation of part of migration management beyond the borders of EU Member States, the concept of ‘Europe’s external

border' is taking on new dimensions. It is becoming increasingly 'multiple', as it "establishes direct contacts with all 'parts' of the world" and is essentially a kind of 'world-boundary', "which nevertheless has specific 'European' characteristics stemming from history, geography and politics" (Balibar, 2004: 1-2). This makes it increasingly difficult to conceive of the EU as a clearly defined and delimited political entity of 'closed territoriality'. First, European integration is (still) an incomplete process and no one can predict with certainty where its development will finally stop. Thus, in the current enlargement constellation, we can speak of different stages of externalisation or formal legal-political integration of the different territories and their citizens in the direct and indirect proximity of the EU.¹ The continuous process of EU enlargement thus "challenges the theory and practice of defining European membership precisely because it sheds light on how the deterritorialisation and relocalisation of the borders of the EU political community leads to a fragmentation of the legal subjectivity of the citizen" (Rigo, 2005: 14). This is also why borders and migration are one of the key negotiating chapters in the enlargement process, as the candidate countries have to "fully implement the communitarian *acquis* in these areas, even before the completion of their integration and even though they have not participated in the negotiations and the decision-making process" (Rigo, 2005: 3-4).

Secondly, in addition to the continuous negotiation of the formal integration of the new Member States into the EU's institutional structure, which mainly implies the continuous harmonisation of the candidate countries' legislation with EU law, one of the most important mechanisms for the management of the EU's (mainly southern and eastern) borders and border areas is the so-called European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Its main purpose is to involve the 'neighbouring countries,'² officially referred to as the 'circle of friends,' in processes of economic integration and joint border and migration management. The ENP, as 'an extension of EU governance beyond its borders' (Delanty and Rumford, 2005: 126), indicates the global dimension of EU policies. It involves not only the Member States, but also partner countries, EU agencies, inter-governmental, non-governmental and international organisations, and a wide range of other public and private bodies. The ENP is thus creating new Euro-

1 We are referring here in particular to the different legal-formal statuses of: 1. citizens of different EU countries, where the freedom of movement of citizens of the new EU Member States may be restricted by different lengths of transition periods and by police controls at internal borders; 2. citizens of candidate countries; and 3. third-country nationals residing in the EU who do not have the nationality of one of the EU Member States. These categories are not an external part of the EU, but an integral part of it, at the different stages of its integration.

2 The Neighbouring Countries category currently includes Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco.

pean geopolitics and “a new vocabulary of spatial policies: ‘prosperity zones’, ‘rapprochement policies’, ‘new neighbourhood’, ‘wider Europe’, ‘border areas or borderlands’, and ‘circle of friends’” (Delanty and Rumford, 2005: 127). It should be stressed that the ENP differs significantly from classical enlargement in that it envisages only the management of common space between the EU and its neighbours or partner countries but without the possibility of their formal integration into the EU in the short term. This conceptualisation of ‘partnership’, which is in effect “integration without enlargement” (Delanty and Rumford, 2005: 127), in which the EU and the partner countries share “everything but the institutions,”³ clearly illustrates some of the elements of subordination of the partner countries. The effects of the carefully chosen areas of cooperation, which are almost exclusively dictated by the EU, are skewed in favour of the EU’s institutional matrix. In contrast to countries that are offered membership by the EU in exchange for integration into its migration framework, for neighbouring countries that cannot be offered this ‘carrot’, “the EU is concerned with how to integrate migration and asylum into a broader negotiating framework that allows the EU’s migration and internal security objectives (which may be perceived by non-member countries as unwelcome impositions) to be enforced through sweetheart deals such as development and economic aid” (Boswell and Geddes, 2011: 133).

Thirdly, the EU, through the process of ‘externalisation’ of European migration policy, is exporting migration management and thus the border regime to neighbouring and ‘safe’⁴ countries. The so-called Return and Readmission Agreements (RRAs)⁵ play a key role in the implementation of the ‘safe country’ principle by providing a legal basis for deporting irregular migrants back to the non-member country that is presumed to have been the migrant’s point of departure. Practices based on readmission agreements are thus, on the one hand, one of the most obvious manifestations of the external expansion of the ‘European’ border, while, on the other hand, such agreements are ‘dispositifs

3 Statement by former President of the European Commission Romano Prodi. See Prodi, 2002.

4 After Germany pioneered the ‘Safe State’ principle in 1993, it was soon adopted by other Member States. All countries bordering the EU were declared ‘safe’, thus becoming a kind of ‘tampon zone’ for ‘transit migration’ to the West. The primary purpose of the principle is to prevent applicants for international protection from entering the EU from a so-called ‘safe’ country, or to return them to a ‘safe’ country in the event of their being caught in the EU. The circle of safe countries is expanding in proportion to the inclusion of new Member States in the EU, which apply the ‘safe’ country principle to their neighbours (see Rigo, 200: 5–6).

5 The first such agreement was signed by Germany and Poland in 1993. This was followed by other Member States signing similar agreements with the candidate countries they border. This practice was continued by the candidate countries, which had to sign analogous agreements with the migrants’ countries of origin in order to enter the Schengen area.

of control', "constituting administrative borders whose function is not merely to keep out those perceived as 'transgressors', but first and foremost to control populations outside and inside the state territory" (Rigo, 2005: 7). This type of practice is facilitated and reinforced by the so-called 'principle of conditionality', which is a key instrument for obtaining the consent of countries of origin to such agreements, as it sets the extent of quotas for the legal entry of their nationals into EU territory following the willingness of the state to prevent irregular migration and to accept deported nationals.

Finally, the externalisation of migration management and the expansion of the border is further enhanced by the administrative border of diplomatic missions, in addition to deportation mechanisms in the form of return agreements, the safe country principle and the principle of conditionality. Migrants who wish to organise their documentation for legal entry into the EU are already confronted with the border in their countries of origin, at the embassies and consulates of the Member States. Here too, border controls are carried out remotely, far beyond the borders of the EU itself. It is a kind of 'police à distance' (see Bigo and Guild, 2003), "mechanisms of surveillance carried out by 'professionals' of security strategies who are not national police forces but diplomatic authorities and administrative bureaucracies" (Rigo, 2005: 7). Here, too, we can observe the productive nature of the border, which, in addition to new legal, political and territorial relations, also produces new subjects of surveillance and new forms of knowledge.

Digitalisation

In the emerging border regime, the static nature of national territorial border procedures has been replaced by a decentralised and mobile network of surveillance and intrusive technologies, and its key instrument is no longer physical barriers, but a diffuse system of databases of personal, medical, labour and procedural data, which allow for the hierarchisation and selection of movement flows. In doing so, it relies primarily on technological support, which includes "hardware of new technologies (such as the storage and computational capacity of databases) and software that enables detection, recognition, information sharing and tracking" (Broeders, 2011: 48). This new cartography of the European border regime and its dynamic borders is largely determined by the Schengen system of border surveillance and management, collectively known

as the Schengen area.⁶ The ideology of the Schengen regime is the abolition of internal borders and the consolidation of common external borders. Schengen is supposed to create conditions which, on the one hand, allow the unhindered movement of people, capital and goods, thus further strengthening the smooth functioning of the so-called internal market, and, on the other hand, effectively prevent the intrusion of unwanted elements through stricter border controls at the frontiers of what it has established as its external borders. In this context, international crime, smuggling and illegal migration are most often mentioned in a very generalised, superficial and, above all, indiscriminate manner. The new and expanded border regime is thus intended to represent a kind of mapping of the classical concept of the border onto a broader, transnational level. Therefore, deterritorialising the Schengen borders does not mean abolishing them. On the contrary, its entry into force multiplies and reterritorialises the borders throughout the territory of the signatory countries and beyond.

One of the key dispositions of the digital border regime is the extensive network of databases and systems “that store personal and travel data, whose profiles mark the line between those who are ‘in’ and those who are ‘out’, between the desirable and the undesirable, the legal and the illegal” (Broeders 2011, 46). The most important databases that form the core of migration governance at the European level are the first- and second-generation Schengen Information System,⁷ the European Dactylographic System⁸ and the Visa Information System.⁹ These three databases are a fundamental indicator and instrument of what Broeders (2011: 49) calls the ‘digitisation’ of European borders. Border surveillance is thus increasingly becoming a kind of ‘sorting machine’ (see Broe-

6 The Schengen area dates back to 1985, when Germany, France and the Benelux countries signed the so-called Schengen Treaty, which aimed to strengthen cooperation between the signatories by abolishing internal borders and creating a common external border. In 1990, the Schengen Treaty was replaced by the Schengen Convention. With the entry into force of the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1999, the Schengen Convention became part of EU law.

7 The establishment of the Schengen Information System (SIS) is first mentioned in the Schengen Treaty, which establishes the free movement of persons between the signatory countries, and the idea is built upon in the Schengen Convention, which sets out a list of measures to compensate for this freedom of movement with additional ‘security’ surveillance mechanisms.

8 Hereinafter referred to as Eurodac. Eurodac is designed to help implement the provisions of the Dublin Convention, the primary purpose of which is to determine the competence and responsibility of each country in the procedures for granting an individual international protection status. In other words, the system allows for the recording and verification of all asylum applications lodged at EU level, thus preventing multiple applications by a single person in several countries. Recording is done by collecting and comparing fingerprints.

9 Hereafter referred to as VIS. VIS, as part of the EU’s migration databases, focuses on regulating the entry and stay of migrants on the basis of a short-term transit or residence permit, known as a visa. Its purpose is to make it easier to control the visa procedures of individuals in other countries and thus prevent so-called visa shopping. Similarly to Eurodac, the VIS seeks to build up a database whose main purpose is to ‘re-identify’ migrants using biometric data.

ders, 2011: 47), aimed at selecting and categorising global mobile populations as quickly and accurately as possible. It already suggests and incorporates features that suggest, that in the future it will be “driven by information, personal characteristics and profiles, and its product will be identification” (Broeders, 2011: 47).

The emerging border regime as the general trend towards the computerisation and digitalisation of the management and surveillance of mobility, including of citizens, is not limited to the collection and processing of personal data but also encompasses the computerisation of the body itself (see Metcalfe, 2021). This is most clearly expressed in the use of biometrics, which can be defined as a set of “digital representations of physical characteristics that are unique to an individual, such as fingerprints, iris, retinal vascular patterns, hand shape, face, voice” (Van der Ploeg and Sprenkels, 2011: 75). The body is increasingly becoming a ‘machine component’: “it is interpreted and formatted as if it were a storage device for information that needs only to be scanned in order to be registered” (Dijstelbloem, Meijer and Besters, 2011: 12). The body, as a ‘universal identity card of the future’ (see Van der Ploeg 1999: 301) and as ‘digital information’ (see Van der Ploeg and Sprenkels, 2011: 92), can be monitored permanently and everywhere, without the need for either the knowledge or the consent of the monitored person. The ‘machine-readable body’ (see Van der Ploeg, 2002) is embedded in “digital files, information networks, databases, software and search engines. ... Our DNA is a code, our medical history is an electronic patient record, our physical vulnerabilities become a risk profile ... and our identity is an algorithmically produced biometric template” (Van der Ploeg and Sprenkels, 2011: 74). The use of technology and biometrics in the ‘surveillance society’ turns the body into a ‘password’ (see Deleuze, 1995), as it is “based on the assumption that the human body is incapable of lying” (Broeders, 2011: 48).

Biometrics as a “technique, as a concept and as a practice” (Van der Ploeg and Sprenkels, 2011: 93) of extracting, collecting, classifying, profiling and hierarchising heterogeneous data, has been the subject of much criticism and concern. First, the fundamental assumption of biometrics that the body can be ‘translated’ into standardised and comparable technical variables is dubious at best, since ‘universal’ and ‘stable’ physical traits, i.e. “traits that everyone has and that do not change over the years” (Van der Ploeg and Sprenkels, 2011: 99), do not exist. The inherent flaw of biometrics is therefore the fact that “if the body really ‘speaks’ here, it does so only through a long series of ‘translations’ based on a ‘dictionary’ that no one really understands” (Van der Ploeg and Sprenkels, 2011: 98). Second, any social categorisation necessarily raises issues related to the concept of social justice, as it stigmatises certain social

groups in advance, thus exposing them to “exclusion and automated decisions, with all the possible attendant risks” (Van der Ploeg and Sprenkels, 2011: 93). Finally, the technologisation and digitisation of surveillance can also be seen as a dangerous attempt to camouflage inherently political decisions in various forms of impersonal and purely technological processes that are supposedly impartial, fair and humane, as technology and databases reduce complex social realities to simple binary oppositions such as ‘presence’ or ‘absence of observation’. However, “behaviour, in general, is more complex than the yes/no dichotomy allows”, and it is therefore necessary to “recognise the political character of the techno-social simplifications involved” (Dijstelbloem, Meijer and Brom, 2011: 173).

Trends in the development of border and migration governance at the EU level indicate how certain dispositions and technologies, which initially target only a certain category of the population, in this case third-country migrants, are translated into systems that aim at the inclusion of entire populations. If, on the one hand, data systems have emerged as a mechanism for exclusion and expulsion, on the other hand, it is possible “to build profiles from stored data from which new information about individuals and groups can be extrapolated for later use in policies” (Broeders, 2011: 62). The history of the development of databases, biometrics, and the use of supposedly objective and universal surveillance technology also reveals a desire to conceptually close issues related to the categorisation, selection and exclusion of certain categories of the population to “ethical or political debate or scrutiny”, thus concealing a more accurate description of these developments “as an example of the truism ‘technology is the continuation of politics by other means’” (Van der Ploeg and Sprenkels, 2011: 97).

East and South

Over the past decade, the EU has faced four significant ruptures: the financial and refugee crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Ukraine war. European integrations have struggled to effectively address these critical challenges, undermining confidence in EU solutions and giving rise to increased nationalism and populism within and across its member states. Each of these events has thus contributed to the fragmentation of the European political landscape. Paradoxically, however, they have also reinforced EU unity by tightening Europe’s external borders, also through the reinforcement

and expansion of ‘technical barriers’ on its Eastern and Southern frontiers. This policrisis, where individual crises are never completely resolved, but just layered one upon the other, has brought about the current European geography, marked by increased social segmentation, political fragmentation, territorial isolation, and growing tensions between centre and periphery. The financial crisis exacerbated the already existing social inequalities and ignited political divisions within the EU. The interests of large core economies such as Germany and France have clashed with those of more peripheral, poorer economies such as Greece, Italy and Spain. The refugee crisis that spilled over into Europe in 2015/16 further intensified this tension. Even after the supposed end of major displacements, southern and south-eastern Europe – regions that had already shouldered much of the responsibility for migrants before 2016 – continue to be the most exposed to ongoing migration. Partly due to their geographical location, but largely due to divergent European regulations, ineffective relocation mechanisms and a lack of solidarity between member states. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and intensified the existing inequalities between central and peripheral regions, with southern European countries suffering the most due to austerity measures imposed during the financial crisis, which brought about major reductions in public investment in health and care systems. The pandemic across Europe led to a generalised state of emergency, marked by the closure of national and municipal borders, the imposition of curfews, and restrictions on political and economic freedoms. In many cases, this period also saw a drift towards authoritarian governance (See Stojić Mitrović, 2021). At the onset of the Ukrainian crisis, there seemed to be a notable display of European unity. Many EU countries, including Slovenia, quickly enacted supportive legislative measures that extended various rights to Ukrainian refugees and kept their borders open for arrivals. On the one hand, this response demonstrates that, with the necessary political will, effective and rapid action can be taken to support large numbers of displaced people. But on the other hand, despite the high-flying rhetoric, the actual implementation of these rights has been slow. Meanwhile, non-Ukrainian asylum seekers are being overlooked and neglected, highlighting persistent issues of bias and racism within the European asylum system.

In March 2016, following the closure of the Balkan Corridor, the European border regime in Southern and South-Eastern Europe was gradually restored (see Beznec et al., 2016; Hess and Kaparek, 2017), while migratory movements continued by returning to the underground and thus to deep vulnerability. The new border regime in Southern Europe retains most of the main features of the pre-2016 era, such as the renewed externalisation of European migra-

tion control to non-European countries (for example Turkey and North African countries), the renewed containment of the migration 'crisis' in Southern Europe (through push-backs and prevention of secondary migration) and the continued use of a specific mix of securitarian and humanitarian practices by the affected countries. Since the breakup of Yugoslavia, the Balkans have been progressively integrating into the European border regime, particularly through EU and Schengen area accession, at varying speeds and intensities across different countries. But after March 2016, the importance of the Balkans as a kind of 'tampon zone' between the 'outside' and 'core Europe' has risen to a much higher level (see Hameršak, Hess, Speer, Stojić Mitrović, 2020). Some of the evolving features of the border regime in South-East Europe involve the rise of new legal and political enclosures as well as securitised infrastructures along all the affected countries, thereby transforming some traditionally transit states into countries of prolonged immobility (most notably Turkey, Greece, Italy, Serbia and BiH) (See Stojić et al., 2022).

Consequently, thousands of people on the move are deprived of basic infrastructure, basic services and access to any legal procedures. Forced collective push-backs are being normalised in clear violation of EU law, international law and various human rights conventions (see Black Book of Push-backs, 2020). Walls, fences and other 'technical barriers' are being erected, bringing new divisions and tensions between the nations of the Western Balkans, which are still recovering from the aftermaths of a recent civil war. Humanitarian approaches are subordinated to security priorities, and solidarity activities are increasingly criminalised. Political and media rhetoric is escalating, presenting refugees as a 'problem', a 'burden' and a 'security threat'. Since the crisis at the Belarus-Poland border, refugees have increasingly been described as 'weapons', and cross-border movements have been referred to as 'hybrid threats.' Furthermore, even if refugees manage to overcome these challenges and reach EU Member States to apply for international protection, they still encounter numerous difficulties and ongoing insecurity. In summary, the Balkan Route is more akin to a complex circuit than a straightforward path from point A to point B. It resembles a spiral or cycle of 'hypermobility', with migrants repeatedly crossing borders and shifting between various legal statuses (see Stojić et al., 2022). In short, the re-establishment of this intricate and dynamic border regime has not reduced border violence or reinstated adherence to international laws and conventions (see Hess and Kasperek, 2022).

Alternate Current

On the other hand, several supportive initiatives have developed over the past two decades in the form of solidarity movements, projects and one-off or permanent actions. In the Balkans too, solidarity structures engage in public advocacy and campaigns, assisting integration, providing legal assistance, and establishing and maintaining community spaces. They are building critical opposition to growing right-wing populism, militarisation and ubiquity of borders, increased police authorities, new restrictive legislation, the normalisation of the practice of violent, brutal and massive push-backs throughout the region, the hopelessness and tragedy of thousands of stranded migrants with no hope for further travel or any kind of legalisation of their status. Activists and CSOs are documenting, researching, evaluating and reflecting on the past and present policies and practices. They are visiting and monitoring liminal spaces, increasingly forging long-term or day-to-day transnational networks of solidarity. Together with refugees and asylum seekers, they constitute an alternative current of movement facilitation and integration, by forming ‘assemblages of mobilities’ (see Beznec and Kurnik, 2021), ‘border struggles’ (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013) and ‘joint agency’ (Kurnik and Razsa, 2020). Those assemblages, comprised of people on the move as well as local and transnational communities, are an interplay of various forms of resistance and escape, of what is also being referred to as ‘mobile commons’ (Papadopoulos/Tsianos, 2013) or ‘ecologies of mobile existence’ (Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias and Pickles, 2015).

One such example of transnational assemblages or joint agencies is the so-called Balkan version of the Alarm phone, enabled by an activist collective Infokolpa in Slovenia, migrants themselves and with the assistance of the Border Violence Monitoring Network. It was established in the first half of the year 2018, during the period of particularly brutal push-backs of the Croatian police and the formation of a right-wing government in Slovenia. In this period, almost every person, that managed to reach Slovenia, was denied their right to apply for asylum. In the first half of the year, the number of crossings and the number of asylum applications were roughly the same, as usual. In June the statistics radically dropped, indicating a radical shift in the conduct of Slovenian police, implying illegal push-backs and collective returns. After the first testimonials about push-backs published by deported individuals and solidarity volunteers based in Bosnian border towns, activist collective Infokolpa established an info phone with an aim to monitor police procedures on the border. People on the move were in constant contact with the phone number, and once reaching Slovenia, sent their data and location, which was then provided to the ne-

arest police station, several news outlets, NGOs, lawyers and state institutions, thus forcing the police to locate the migrants and receive their asylum requests. In six months of its existence, before being cracked down by extreme political and media frenzy, the alarm phone managed to track more than a 100 people across borders on a purely voluntarily basis and could prove to be a successful practice with a broader political, legal and financial assistance.¹⁰

In the context of a regime of deterritorialised, privatised, externalised and digitalised borders, the view of a 'fortress' Europe' is increasingly obsolete and replaced by a concept of 'liquid borders' (see Moraña, 2021) or membranes of selective inclusion and exclusion. By using the primacy of autonomy of migration (see Bojadžijev and Karakayali, 2002; Pajnik, 2019), the struggles for the extension and deepening of citizenship rights (see Isin, 2002), as the key to the analysis of border regimes, we can move beyond the validation of the banality of the 'border spectacle' (De Genova, 2013). Instead, we can once again transgress the border between those, that are 'inside' (the included, the citizens, the legals) and those supposedly one the 'outside' (the excluded, the foreigners, the illegals). By recognizing that border mobilities and regimes are shaped not only by the violence of sovereign power but also by the power of resistant assemblages, we can finally dive into a decolonised epistemology, where the border between the margin and the centre is in perpetual flux of contestation and negotiation.

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¹⁰ See push-forward.org.

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