BALKAN MIGRATION ROUTE REVISITED

PONOVNO PO BALKANSKI MIGRACIJSKI POTI

Katja Utroša

Uvodnik

Migracije so način življenja.

Zbrana dvojezična besedila so izšla iz aktivnosti kolektiva Infokolpa preteklih nekaj let. Obravnavajo izseke z balkanske migracijske poti, ki se razteza čez Balkanski polotok, obenem pa naslavljajo izzive inkluzije v Sloveniji in preiskujejo razmere v državi izvora Maroku.

Infokolpa izvira iz bojev za svobodo gibanja v zdaj že porušeni Avtonomni tovarni Rog v Ljubljani, predvsem iz prostora Second Home, ki se je nahajal v stavbi v jugovzhodnem delu tovarne in deloval kot karavanseraj, ki je ljudem na poti po odprtju balkanskega migracijskega koridorja leta 2015 ponujal zatočišče, hrano, oblačila in tudi družbenopolitično podporo.

Infokolpa je med letoma 2018 in 2022, v obdobju intenzivnih nezakonitih vračanj na slovensko-hrvaški meji, podrobneje spremljala dogajanje na meji (*border monitoring*).

Od pomladi 2022 upravlja skupnostni prostor Info-office v Ljubljani. Namenjen je ljudem na poti, prosilcem za mednarodno zaščito, beguncem, tujim delavcem, mednarodnim študentom ter lokalnim in mednarodnim aktivistom. Nudi infrastrukturo za skupnostne dejavnosti, skupščine, delavnice, predavanja, druženje, igro, distribucijo humanitarne pomoči ter podporo pri postopkih v zvezi z mednarodno zaščito, delom, bivanjem, iskanjem stanovanj, združitvijo družin ipd.

Zbrana besedila so plod tega dogajanja.

Da v osrčju migracijskih poti ostajajo ljudje, poudarja uvodni esej *Razgaljeni na meji – hladne meje, še hladnejša srca* iranskega političnega begunca in blogerja Siyavasha Shahabija, ki deluje v Grčiji. Njegova prvoosebna pripoved je kritika mejnega režima, ki izhaja iz položaja ujetih na mejah, v begunskih taboriščih, administrativnih labirintih in nenazadnje mrežah tihotapcev.

Tokratni dosje *V iskanju »dostojanstva in normalnega življenja«* je rezultat skupščin in participativnih predavanj s prosilci za mednarodno zaščito, predvsem s tistimi, ki prihajajo iz Maroka, ki ga Slovenija smatra kot varno državo izvora. V letih 2023 in 2024 Maročani tvorijo najštevilčnejšo skupino prosilcev za medna-

rodno zaščito v Sloveniji in so tudi najpogostejši obiskovalci Info-officea.

Slovenija ostaja tranzitna država: večina jo prečka in nadaljuje proti osrednji in zahodni Evropi. Podrobnejši pregled dogajanja opravijo avtorji članka *Razvoj razmer na balkanski poti – Slovenija*, ki izpostavljajo, da je v letih 2023 in 2024 Slovenija zabeležila eno najvišjih števil neregularnih prehodov mej od zaprtja balkanskega koridorja leta 2015. Povečano število je privedlo do prezasedenosti azilnih centrov, sprožilo negativne odzive lokalnega prebivalstva – ter obenem pokazalo, da kljub tehnologijam in praksam nadzora balkanska migracijska pot živi.

Barbara Beznec v članku *Meje v gibanju – od fizičnih meja do sociotehničnih režimov* pokaže, kako se množi razdeljevalna moč sodobnega mejnega režima, ki ga opredeli s procesi deteritorializacije, privatizacije, eksternalizacije in digitalizacije. Vendar pa izpostavi tudi alternativne tokove, ki se tem trendom zoperstavljajo. Med njimi subjektivnost in solidarnostne prakse tistih, ki potujejo po migracijskih poteh, kakor tudi napore lokalnih in transnacionalnih solidarnostnih in aktivističnih kolektivov in mrež.

Vendar pa migracije družbam ne zastavljajo le vprašanj o svobodi gibanja, temveč tudi glede inkluzije in zagotavljanja enake obravnave. Kaja Gajšek in Aigul Hakimova v članku *Vprašanje primernih stanovanj v Sloveniji s poudarkom na migrantih* izpostavita stanovanjsko problematiko, ki se zaradi odsotnosti nacionalnih stanovanjskih strategij in politik zaostruje. Posebej najemniki in migranti se soočajo s številnimi stanovanjskimi problemi, vključno z visokimi najemninami in tekočimi stroški, slabimi bivanjskimi pogoji in splošno nestabilnostjo ter diskriminacijo pri dostopu do primernega stanovanja.

Infokolpa je tudi sopodpisnica javne pobude in peticije za izboljšanje programov učenja slovenskega jezika za tujce, ki opozarja na težave, s katerimi se soočajo migranti pri učenju slovenskega jezika in vključevanja v družbo.

Splošnejše analize se loteva esej *Refleksija o migracijah* Maročana Ahmeda Bouladena, ki je prepotoval balkansko migracijsko pot. Poudarja dolgo zgodovino in raznolikost migracijskih dejavnikov, na katere vplivajo tudi neokolonialna razmerja moči, ki poglabljajo globalne neenakosti.

Prevodni besedili maroškega revolucionarja Mehdija Ben Barke, učitelja matematike, sopodpisnika razglasitve maroške neodvisnosti in predsednika pripravljalnega odbora trikontinentalne konference, sta poročili, ki ju je leta 1960 pripravil za konferenci v Tunisu in Bejrutu. Menimo, da gre za prve prevode njegovih tekstov v slovenščino. Izbor avtorja izhaja iz Infokolpinega spomladanskega bralnega krožka (2024), na katerem smo pod težo genocida v Gazi brali še Torkila Lauesena, Ho Chi Minha, Martina Luthra Kinga ml. in druge.

Ben Barka je v nepojasnjenih okoliščinah izginil leta 1965 v Parizu. Leta 1956 se je maroška kraljevina osamosvojila. Vendar pa pogoji neodvisnosti niso odpravili gospodarskih in političnih neenakosti, značilnih za kolonialne dinamike moči, o čemer je govoril tudi Ben Barka. V politično situacijo, ki je zaznamovala Maroko sredi prejšnjega stoletja v času osvobodilnih gibanj v Afriki, se poglobi intervju z maroškim politologom Abdelkbirjem Sahirjem, ki živi v Sloveniji. Sahir opiše življenje in delo revolucionarja – čigar prezgodnja smrt, »politični zločin«, je zaznamovala razvoj levih politik v poosamosvojitvenem Maroku, obenem pa negativno vplivala na globalno protiimperialistično gibanje.

Zbrana besedila kolektiva Infokolpa poudarjajo, da so migracije predvsem človeške zgodbe, zaznamovane z iskanjem dostojanstva in svobode. Kljub izzivom, ki jih prinaša letos sprejeti evropski pakt o migracijah in azilu, kolektiv še naprej gradi prostor solidarnosti, opozarja na sistemske krivice in spodbuja prizadevanja za pravičnejšo in bolj vključujočo družbo.

Katja Utroša

Introduction

Migrating is a way of life.

The bilingual texts, in English and Slovenian, stem from the Infokolpa collective's activities over the past few years. They address excerpts from the Balkan migration route, which stretches across the Balkan Peninsula. They also examine the challenges of inclusion in Slovenia and investigate the situation in Morocco, a frequent country of origin.

Infokolpa has its roots in the struggles for freedom of movement at the now demolished Rog Autonomous Factory in Ljubljana, in particular in the space Second Home, which was located in a building in the south-eastern part of the factory and functioned as a caravanserai offering shelter, food, clothing and socio-political support to people on the move after the opening of the Balkan migration corridor in 2015.

Between 2018 and 2022, during the intense period of pushbacks at the Slovenian-Croatian border, Infokolpa conducted comprehensive border monitoring, calling attention to illegal border practices of the Slovenian state and others.

From 2022 onward, Infokolpa manages the Info-office community space in Ljubljana. It is intended for individuals in transit, applicants for international protection, refugees, foreign workers, international students, and local and international activists. It provides infrastructure for various community activities, including assemblies, workshops, lectures, social events, and the distribution of humanitarian aid. Additionally, it offers support for procedures related to international protection, work, residence, housing, family reunification, etc.

The texts are a consequence of these efforts.

The opening essay *Stripped by the Border – Cold Borders, Colder Hearts* by the Iranian political refugee and blogger Siyavash Shahabi, based in Greece, reinforces the notion that individuals continue to be at the core of migration routes. His first-person account offers a critique of the border regime based on the experiences of those trapped at the borders, in refugee camps, smuggling networks

and administrative labyrinths.

The dossier *In Pursuit of "Dignity and a Normal Life"* documents a series of assemblies and participatory lectures conducted with applicants for international protection, focusing on individuals who arrived from Morocco, which Slovenia deems a safe country of origin. In 2023 and 2024, Moroccans constituted the largest group of applicants for international protection in Slovenia and were also the most frequent visitors to the Info-office.

Slovenia continues to be a transit country: most traversing the Balkan route subsequently proceed to Central and Western Europe. A more detailed overview is provided by the authors of the article *Recent Developments on the Balkan Route – Slovenia*, who highlight that in 2023 and 2024, Slovenia recorded one of the highest numbers of irregular border crossings since the closure of the Balkan corridor in 2015. The rise in numbers has resulted in overcrowding in asylum centres and elicited adverse responses from the local population. However, it has also shown that despite the increasing use of technologies and practices of control, the Balkan migration route remains active.

In her article, *Borders on the Move—From Physical Lines to Sociotechnical Regimes*, Barbara Beznec demonstrates how the divisive influence of the contemporary border regime is multiplying. She defines the phenomenon through an examination of four key processes: deterritorialisation, privatisation, externalisation, and digitalisation. However, she also draws attention to alternative currents that challenge these trends. These include the subjectivity and solidarity practices of those traversing migratory routes and the efforts of local and transnational solidarity and activist collectives and networks.

Migration does not only pose questions on freedom of movement but also inclusion and ensuring equal treatment. In their article, *The Issue of Adequate Housing in Slovenia with a Focus on Migrants*, Kaja Gajšek and Aigul Hakimova identify the housing problem as a significant challenge, particularly in the absence of national housing strategies and policies. Tenants and migrants are particularly vulnerable to various housing-related challenges, including high rental costs and associated expenses, inadequate living standards, and a lack of stability and access to suitable housing.

Furthermore, Infokolpa is a co-signatory of the public initiative and petition to improve Slovenian language learning programmes for foreigners. This initiative highlights the challenges faced by migrants in learning the Slovenian language and their inclusion into the wider society.

In his essay, *Reflections on Migration*, Ahmed Bouladen, a Moroccan who has traversed the Balkan migration route, draws attention to the lengthy history and multifaceted nature of migration drivers shaped by neo-colonial power re-

lations that serve to deepen global inequalities.

The two texts by the Moroccan revolutionary Mehdi Ben Barka, a mathematics teacher, co-signatory of the Proclamation of Independence of Morocco and chairman of the preparatory committee of the Tricontinental Conference, are reports he prepared for conferences in Tunis and Beirut in 1960. We believe these are the first translations of his texts into the Slovenian language. He was selected for Infokolpa's spring reading circle (2024), where, in the context of the ongoing genocide in Gaza, we also read works by Torkil Lauesen, Ho Chi Minh, Martin Luther King Jr. and others.

Ben Barka disappeared in 1965 in Paris under unexplained circumstances. In 1956, the Moroccan monarchy gained its independence. However, as pointed out by Ben Barka, its conditions did not end the economic and political inequalities inherent in colonial power dynamics. The interview with Abdelkbir Sahir, a Moroccan political scientist based in Slovenia, explores the political context that shaped Morocco during the mid-twentieth century, particularly the dynamics surrounding African liberation movements. Sahir provides an account of the life and work of the revolutionary, whose premature death, characterised as a 'political crime', precipitated the evolution of left-wing politics in post-independence Morocco while simultaneously exerting a detrimental influence on the global anti-imperialist movement.

Infokolpa's collected texts try to demonstrate that migration is a complex phenomenon comprising a multitude of human stories marked by the search for dignity and freedom. Despite the challenges the new European Pact on Migration and Asylum brings, the collective persists in establishing spaces of solidarity, drawing attention to systemic injustices and promoting a fairer and more inclusive society.

Siyavash Shahabi

Stripped by the Border: Cold Borders, Colder Hearts

There is something about the cold that strips away all illusion. It was winter 2017 when I crossed the border from Turkey to Greece and landed in Thessaloniki. Fourteen of us, huddled together, braving the ice-cold night. Some had been pushed back before – tortured, jailed, and sent back again. No one stayed long in any one place. "We were arrested here last time," they would say, moving us along like shadows in the night. More than ten hours of walking through freezing rain, numb from the cold but unable to stop. That night felt like it would never end.

Cold has a way of breaking you down. I remember other freezing nights too. As a child in Tehran and Sanandaj, I stood in long lines with my mother for oil, shivering in the snow. But no memory could prepare me for that border. The brutality of it all. Six years have passed since, and yet that night haunts me. I am one of the lucky ones – lucky to no longer be there, waiting in fear and cold. But others are still there, trapped, stripped bare by men who wear uniforms and call themselves protectors.

They don't just push you back, they strip you down – literally. The Greek border police beat us, took our clothes, money, and phones. Everything. They left people to die on the other side. I've seen the photos. Helpless bodies, abandoned. In the middle of it all, these men in power steal everything and send people back into the arms of death.

This isn't just a story from the past. It is still happening. People call me, begging for help, desperate for some kind of escape. The borders, like invisible chains, trap them in a place where their humanity is erased. It's 2022, and yet people still risk their lives, crossing borders that treat them like criminals for

wanting to live.

For now, I am writing this, in the hope that someone, somewhere, hears the call and chooses to act. Because this fight is far from over.

The Balkan Route is a well-worn path of human movement, migration, and exile. To speak of it today as a "refugee crisis" obscures the deeper history it reflects – one of conquest, loss, and search for a better life. Borders have been drawn and redrawn, and the people have always found themselves at the mercy of forces beyond their control, whether they are empires or states. Today, the desperation that drives families and individuals to traverse the Balkan Route is no different. The faces of those who cross are the same faces that history has always seen: fleeing violence, starvation, and oppression. This time, the faces belong to Syrians, Afghans, Iraqis, and others displaced by the wreckage of our modern world.

Stanley Cohen's concept of "moral panic" speaks well to the refugee management crisis unfolding across Europe. Cohen's framework, introduced in his critical work Folk Devils and Moral Panics, highlights how society; when faced with phenomena it cannot control, reacts with fear and anxiety. Refugees, in this framework, are cast as the new "folk devils," symbols of a broader unease about the changes sweeping the continent. The panic over their arrival is not about the individuals themselves. Instead, it's about the fear of what their presence signifies: the collapse of borders, cultures, and the imagined security that Europe once enjoyed.

Europe's history is replete with examples of how outsiders have been cast as threats to the social order. From the Romani to the Jewish communities, from colonial subjects to migrants today, the figure of the foreigner has often been manipulated to stir fear. Today, this manipulation takes the form of right-wing political rhetoric and sensationalist media coverage, both of which portray refugees as an existential threat to European identity.

However, the truth is that the refugee crisis is not some unprecedented event, nor is it an invasion. It is simply a continuation of the centuries-old story of human migration, exacerbated by modern geopolitical forces like war, poverty, and climate change. The Balkan Route is not just a geographic journey; it is a symbol of survival, of human resilience in the face of almost unimaginable adversity.

The Balkan Route: A Human Journey

The Balkan Route is a harsh path stretching from the Middle East and South Asia through Turkey, Greece, and the Balkan states before winding its way to the

heart of Europe. The people who undertake this journey are often fleeing war zones, oppressive regimes, and economic devastation. For many, Europe represents the final hope for a future that they've been denied in their home countries. The journey is one of hope but also great peril. Refugees face not only the physical dangers of crossing treacherous landscapes but also the human-made obstacles that stand in their way. Borders along the Balkan Route are heavily patrolled by police and military forces. These borders, drawn by nations that have grown fearful of what lies beyond, are marked by walls and fences that seek to keep the unwanted out. The most notorious of these is Hungary's 2015 fence along its border with Serbia. This fence stands as a symbol of Europe's divided response to the refugee crisis – a mix of fear and reluctant acceptance.

Zygmunt Bauman, a Polish sociologist, identified two primary reactions societies have towards strangers: anthropophagy (the attempt to absorb and assimilate them) and anthropoemy (the desire to expel them). Europe's response to refugees along the Balkan Route has wavered between these two extremes. On the one hand, there is rhetoric about integration and humanitarianism. On the other, there are policies that focus on exclusion – detention centres, deportations, and political barriers. Europe's schizophrenic response to the refugee crisis reveals its deeper anxieties about its identity and future.

Matthew Gibney, a political theorist, referred to this as a "schizophrenic" policy, not simply because of its inconsistency but because it mirrors a deeper contradiction within European societies. Europe has long prided itself on its humanitarian values, enshrined in documents like the 1951 Refugee Convention. But in practice, these values clash with the reality of a Europe that increasingly wants to protect its borders and insulate itself from the rest of the world. The refugee crisis, therefore, challenges the very foundations of the modern European state, which is built on the premise of controlling who enters and who is excluded.

The Fear of the Stranger

Why does the refugee evoke such intense fear in Europe? Part of the answer lies in the nature of the refugee as the "stranger." Georg Simmel, a German sociologist, once described the stranger as someone physically close but not fully part of the community. They are both familiar and foreign, a figure who disrupts the boundaries of "us" and "them." Refugees, in this context, represent more than just individuals seeking safety; they symbolize the breakdown of the

social order and the intrusion of the outside into the domestic.

The media has played a crucial role in stoking this fear. Across Europe, from Britain to France, tabloid newspapers and right-wing politicians have painted refugees as a threat to national security, economic stability, and cultural identity. They are portrayed as criminals, opportunists, or terrorists – people who come not to seek asylum but to take advantage of the welfare system or change the cultural fabric of Europe.

This portrayal, however, is not just the result of xenophobia. It stems from deeper anxieties about globalization and the loss of control in a world where borders are increasingly porous. The refugee, in many ways, represents the breakdown of the nation-state itself, the collapse of the idea that countries can neatly control who comes in and who stays out. Refugees are scapegoated for a range of fears – fears about terrorism, unemployment, and cultural loss.

The Human Cost

Amid all the rhetoric and fearmongering, the human cost of the refugee crisis is often forgotten. The people who travel the Balkan Route are not faceless masses; they are individuals with stories, dreams, and lives. They are families torn apart by war, children who have seen more violence than most of us could imagine, men and women who have risked everything in the hope of a better life.

The human cost of the journey along the Balkan Route is immeasurable, felt in both the physical and emotional toll on the refugees who undertake it. This route, which has become a lifeline for those fleeing war and economic ruin, is fraught with peril. Each step forward is met with new risks, and for many, the dream of reaching safety in Europe turns into a nightmare of exploitation, violence, and despair.

One of the elements of the Balkan Route is the smugglers' network that has grown around it. Refugees, many of whom have already lost everything, are forced to rely on smugglers to guide them through treacherous terrains and heavily fortified borders. These smugglers, charge them exorbitant amounts of money for passage. In Turkey, for example, refugees may pay between 100 and 400 euros just to receive specific GPS coordinates that direct them across the border into Bulgaria. The process is repeated at every stage of the journey, with similar payments required to navigate through Bulgaria, Serbia, Bosnia, and Croatia. Each new stretch of the journey demands fresh payments, and for many refugees, this becomes a vicious cycle of financial extortion.

For those who cannot afford the piecemeal payments at every border, a more comprehensive service is available – at an astronomical cost. Some refugees pay around 10,000 euros for a "full package," where they are escorted by traffickers from one border to the next. This service includes a guide who hands the refugees over to new smugglers after crossing each border, and local drivers who navigate rural, backroad routes to avoid detection by authorities. These services, while ensuring somewhat safer passage, come at the cost of further financial ruin for families already devastated by the hardships of war and displacement.

Bosnia, in particular, has become a focal point in the smuggling operations along the Balkan Route. Its porous borders, combined with a shortage of border guards, make it a preferred route for traffickers. These networks thrive on the vulnerability of refugees, many of whom are forced to trust smugglers as their only means of escape. The sheer scale of the trafficking operations is staggering, and the lack of border security only exacerbates the situation. With nearly a third of Bosnia's border police set to retire in the coming years, the situation is likely to worsen, making it even easier for traffickers to exploit the route.

The numbers of refugees travelling along the Balkan Route have decreased, due in large part to increased border security and changes in migration trends. However, for those who continue to make the journey, the dangers remain as severe as ever. The tightened borders have not stopped the flow of refugees, but they have forced them to take more dangerous routes, often at the mercy of traffickers who exploit their vulnerability. Each border crossed is a new gamble – another chance to fall victim to theft, assault, or extortion at the hands of those who profit from human suffering.

For the refugees themselves, the costs are not only financial but physical and emotional as well. Many endure harsh conditions, travelling by foot across rugged terrain, being exposed to the elements and often lacking adequate food, water, or medical care. The strain of the journey leaves lasting scars on the body and mind. Camps in Bosnia and camps like the Silos in Trieste have become notorious for their inhumane conditions, where hundreds of migrants live in squalid, overcrowded spaces with little protection from the cold or access to necessities. Illnesses like bronchitis, pneumonia, and severe abscesses from insect and rat bites are common, with many refugees suffering long-term health consequences due to the harsh living conditions. Despite these appalling circumstances, refugees press on, driven by the hope of finding safety and a better life in Europe.

For many, the emotional toll is as great as the physical one. Families are often separated during the journey, with parents and children losing track of one

another in the chaos of border crossings or detention centres. The constant fear of being caught by authorities or exploited by traffickers weighs heavily on those making the journey. Children, in particular, suffer immensely – many have witnessed unspeakable violence and endured trauma that will haunt them for the rest of their lives. Unaccompanied minors, who are especially vulnerable to exploitation, often fall prey to traffickers who use them for forced labour or worse. In Bosnia, some humanitarian organizations have managed to secure the placement of a few unaccompanied minors into care, but for many, the future remains uncertain.

The humanitarian crisis unfolding along the Balkan Route is not an accident. It is the result of deliberate policies designed to deter refugees from entering Europe. Asylum seekers are forced into situations that endanger their lives, all because Europe has chosen to prioritize its borders over human rights. This policy of exclusion comes at a devastating cost: not just to the refugees themselves but to the moral fabric of Europe, which increasingly turns its back on those in need.

The Politics of Exclusion

At the heart of Europe's refugee crisis is a political struggle over identity and belonging. The rise of right-wing populism across the continent has been fuelled by fears of immigration, particularly from non-European countries. In Italy, Giorgia Meloni's government has temporarily suspended the Schengen Treaty, allowing for border controls along its eastern front with Slovenia. This move is justified by concerns over "national security" in the face of increased migration flows along the Balkan Route.

The reality, however, is that these policies are not about security. They are about creating a political narrative that casts migrants as threats to European stability. In this narrative, migrants become symbols of everything that is wrong with the world: terrorism, economic decline, and cultural decay. By closing its borders, Europe believes it can protect itself from these forces. But in reality, these policies only perpetuate the very crises that drive migration in the first place.

In recent years, Albania has become a focal point in Italy's attempts to manage migration flows. An agreement between the two countries to relocate asylum seekers to reception centres in Albania was recently suspended after Albania's Constitutional Court raised concerns abo-

ut its legality. This agreement, which sought to send up to 3,000 people to Albania immediately after their rescue at sea, reflects the broader trend of outsourcing Europe's refugee crisis to non-EU countries. In this way, Europe attempts to push its moral responsibility for refugees beyond its borders, while continuing to benefit from the global systems that create displacement in the first place.

No End in Sight

There is a deep darkness that surrounds the lives of migrants, a darkness that swallows them whole as they move along the Balkan route, carrying with them the weight of their homes, their memories, and their hopes. And within that darkness, a dangerous temptation waits – tranquillity, offered in the form of pills, powerful drugs, handed out too easily and without care for the lives they invade.

These migrants, moving from one border to another, are not just risking their bodies, but their minds, as the unregulated distribution of drugs like Xanax and antidepressants becomes a quiet epidemic in the camps. It is hard enough to survive the journey, harder still to live with the scars it leaves. But now, without asking for it, without even understanding the language of their prescriptions, they are being drawn into a haze of medication. A haze that offers an escape from the violence, the waiting, the shame of their situation – but at what cost?

Prescribing Xanax in Greek camps is ubiquitous, though people had no mental health complaints. They don't ask for help, but the doctors give them pills as if their suffering were a routine matter, something that could be numbed away. And maybe for a moment, it works. Maybe the pain fades, the sleepless nights are quieted, the memories soften. But when the pill wears off, the darkness is still there, waiting. And now it's even harder to face it because the crutch that was supposed to help you stand has become another chain around your ankles.

It is not only the drugs. The whole system is designed to trap these people in a state of dependency, to keep them in a place where they are neither fully alive nor allowed to move forward. As they wait, sometimes for months, for answers that never come, they sit in camps where violence is normal, where their humanity is slowly stripped away. They wait, and they lose themselves, piece by piece.

And the world outside watches, or perhaps it does not. Perhaps it is easier to ignore the migrants, to look away from their suffering, especially when their presence becomes inconvenient. In Bulgaria and Romania, politicians use the

fear of migrants to stir up hatred, creating a false crisis to distract from the real issues. They spread lies about migrants attacking citizens, about chaos coming to their doorsteps, all to make it easier to justify the brutality that happens at the borders.

At the same time, the European Union strengthens its fences, triples its border guards, and turns a blind eye to the violence that keeps these people out. They talk about protecting their borders, but who is protecting the migrants from the beatings, the pushbacks, the broken bones, and the dog bites they endure? The border guards, the authorities, they are not keeping people safe – they are pushing people into deeper despair, into darker corners of the world, where no one is looking.

And still, the numbers are rising. More people are coming, fleeing war, persecution, hunger, and hopelessness. More people are crossing into Bosnia, more people are waiting outside the camps in Serbia, and more people are beaten and turned away in Croatia. The system does not care about their lives. It only cares about the borders they threaten to cross.

Yet the migrants continue, despite the dangers, despite the darkness. They continue because they have no other choice. The world they left behind is gone, and the world in front of them refuses to let them in. All they have is the journey and the pills they are given to numb the pain.

And what does that say about us? About the societies that allow this to happen? About the systems that choose control over compassion? These are not just nameless faces crossing borders. They are human beings, each with a story, a heart, a mind. And we are losing them to the darkness.

The Long Walk Through Shadows

The brothers had never imagined they would be so far from home, walking through strange lands. Kamran was sixteen, just old enough to carry the weight of his younger brother's fears. His brother, Rami, a year younger but more fragile, relied on Kamran in ways that weren't spoken. The Balkans were a maze of unfamiliar faces, jagged mountains, and cities filled with sounds they didn't understand. They had left Afghanistan with little more than a hope that Germany would be different – better. But the route was harder than they had been told.

Rami was the first to notice the pills. In the refugee camps, the men with tired eyes always seemed to be asleep or staring blankly at nothing. In Greece, when they first arrived, they thought it was just exhaustion from the long journey.

But by the time they reached Serbia, Kamran realized it wasn't just tiredness. At the centre in Belgrade, Rami overheard the men talking about pills, handed out without question, even to those who didn't want them. "They make you forget," one said, almost whispering, as if ashamed.

Kamran and Rami had seen the doctors too, but when Kamran was handed a small white pill, he refused. "I don't need this," he said, trying to explain. But the man in the white coat, who didn't speak Farsi, just shook his head and pushed the pill into his hand. Rami looked at his brother's palm. "What is it?" he asked. Kamran didn't know. He threw it away as soon as they left the office, into the dirt where no one would see.

The camps were full of men lost in themselves. Kamran had heard stories back in Kabul of men who had escaped the war, only to be eaten alive by memories of what they had seen. Maybe that was what the doctors thought they were doing – helping. But no one had asked Kamran what he had seen. They didn't know about the day their house was destroyed, about how their father had died trying to shield them. They didn't know how Rami had screamed for hours afterwards, his face pale with shock, unable to look at their mother's body.

The men in the camps who took the pills no longer screamed. They no longer fought. Maybe they no longer remembered.

One night, in a cold alley outside Sarajevo, Kamran held Rami close, feeling the tremble in his little brother's body. "Don't take anything they give you," Kamran whispered. "Promise me." Rami nodded, his eyes wide with fear, but he stayed silent. They had learned by now that silence was sometimes the only protection they had.

As the weeks passed, they moved closer to the border, closer to the dream of Germany, but the world around them grew harsher. Kamran heard the stories of the Bulgarian police beating migrants, of people being sent back after weeks of waiting. They had escaped brutality in their own country, only to find more along this path.

One morning, they woke to the sound of shouting. Police. Kamran grabbed Rami's arm, pulling him into the shadows of a building. They had become experts at disappearing, slipping through the cracks in this world that didn't want them. But the fear was always there – what if they were caught, pushed back into the camps, where the men handed out pills like candy, trying to dull the edges of the harsh reality?

They didn't talk about it much, but Kamran saw it in his brother's eyes – the slow build of hopelessness, the fear that maybe they wouldn't make it, that maybe the stories about Germany weren't true. That maybe, even if they reached it,

they would still feel the weight of everything they had been running from. But Kamran couldn't let his brother think that. He had to be strong, even when he was unsure.

One evening, in the forests near the border, they met a group of men huddled around a fire. One man, an Afghan like them, spoke softly about the violence on the other side, how the Croatian police had broken his ribs and sent him back. His face was thin, his eyes hollow. Kamran saw the familiar glint of a pill bottle in his hand. The man noticed his stare. "It helps," he said, his voice cracking. "It helps you forget the pain. Just for a while."

Kamran didn't respond. He knew the man wasn't just talking about the broken ribs. He was talking about everything – the war, the loss, the endless walking, the fear that had become part of their blood.

But Kamran didn't want to forget. He didn't want Rami to forget. Forgetting meant losing pieces of themselves, pieces they couldn't afford to lose. They had already lost so much.

The next morning, as the sun rose over the cold, grey landscape, Kamran woke Rami, and they began walking again. They would keep moving. They would not take the pills. They would remember who they were, and where they came from. Because in the end, that was all they had left.

Barbara Beznec

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 Kasparek, 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." (Cuttita, 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, intergovernmental, 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 System[8] 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 Kasparek, 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 reffered 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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