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Abstract

'The Game' is how many refugees describe their attempts to informally travel to Western Europe via the so-called Balkan Route. This article conceptualises The Game as a spatial tactic implemented by refugees as a response to the impossibility of legally entering the EU and as a grey area in the governance of informal migrant mobilities. It does so by engaging with the recent literature on the Balkan Route to analyse how The Game has been performed and 'managed' in Serbia, a key 'buffer state' along the Balkan Route. Drawing from Tazzioli's work on 'The Making of Migration', and in particular on her understanding of refugee forced mobility as a form of 'migrant management' on the part of the authorities, this article shows how the ambivalent connotations of The Game reveal the troubling configurations of EU border politics and of its formal and informal geopolitical arrangements. At the same time, it argues that the practices related to The Game ultimately reflect the extraordinary determination of the refugees in creating new itineraries, spatial interstices, invisible networks and 'holes in the border walls' that allow them, despite all the difficulties, to challenge such border politics. We conclude by proposing to understand The Game as part of the biopolitics of migration along the Balkan Route and by suggesting that it represents a powerful manifestation of the condition (and the field of possibility) of thousands of refugees along the Balkan Route today.

Keywords

Camp geographies; Serbian refugee camps; the making of migration; The Game; Balkan Route

1. Introduction

"On April 17th, 2019, we visit the one-stop reception centre for refugees near the railway station in Šid, Serbia. During the (official) visit, we learn that only a few kilometres away, about 200 refugees are still squatting in what remains of the former Grafosrem factory, despite the factory being evicted several times by the police in recent months. We are told that food is informally distributed by private citizens and that humanitarian organisations, as well as the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (hereafter KIRS), are not involved in that space. I recall visiting that broken building for the first time on a freezing day in January 2018, and finding a few refugees gathered around an improvised fire with very little other than a single shared tent to support their stay. It seemed that such a situation could not persist for long due to the dire living conditions and exposure to extreme temperatures. However, this second visit presents a much larger and more organised group of refugees. The makeshift camp counts several tents and a tentative outdoor kitchen, while the precarious conditions of the building are made worse by the lack of running water and the piles of rubble and garbage occupying part of the 'covered' spaces. Conducting structured or even semi-structured interviews is simply unthinkable in this context. At our arrival we are surrounded by the youngest refugees who are curious about us and ask where we come from. After they discover that two of us are from Italy, some mention their preferred European football team. They all come from Pakistan and intend to 'try The Game' to reach Trieste, Italy, via Croatia and Slovenia. The conversation is fragmented and conducted in simple English. It proves impossible to sit

anywhere or even to speak to individuals: those inclined to engage with us tend to respond collectively. At a certain point, new groups of young men arrive after being pushed back from the border a few kilometres away. The atmosphere becomes tense, and we are left on our own to tour the ruin – no one seems to show any further interest in our presence. Many are now preparing to walk towards the border overnight to ‘try The Game’ and we are increasingly becoming an alien presence in this makeshift landscape of despair and extreme precarity.” (first author fieldnotes)

In the last four years during which the first author investigated with Danica Šantić and Dragan Umek and the archipelago of formal and informal refugee camps in Serbia we have encountered many similar situations. Our project focused on the geography of the so-called Balkan Route(s) and the broader geopolitical implications in the region of what has been described by media and state authorities as a ‘Refugee Crisis’ (recently more aptly presented by Almustafa (2021) as a ‘crisis of protection’), with new walls erected on many borders which have produced an informal geography of makeshift settlements along this corridor (Authors, 2019a). While conducting fieldwork in the region, a key term emerged frequently during conversations focused on the refugees’ informal mobilities, on border crossings and on camp life: *The Game*. Many refugees along the Balkan Route refer to their attempts to informally cross the EU border – by walking through forests, crossing rivers, climbing border fences, jumping trains, hiding in trucks or procuring taxi services via smugglers – as *The Game*, a term which is also used by humanitarian organizations, authorities, and camp management in the region. The ‘making of *The Game*’ is in fact directly or indirectly supported by various actors, such as the smugglers and their associates, but also local camp authorities, and humanitarian and civil society organisations. *The Game* is thus based on a specific informal geography comprised of information travelling through social media, smuggling networks, makeshift and institutional refugee camps, and informal routes across the mountains, rivers and fields of the region. The ambivalent connotations of this term denote the troubling configurations of EU border politics and its formal and informal geopolitical arrangements. It also reflects, to some extent, a sense of pride on the part of the refugees themselves, related to their determination to succeed not only in just crossing, but also in surviving when they are pushed back in preparation for the next attempt. The practices related to *The Game* ultimately reveal the extraordinary determination of the refugees to create interstices, invisible networks and ‘holes in the walls’ that allow them, despite the difficulties, to challenge the border politics in the region.

This article thus tries to conceptualise *The Game* as a spatial tactic implemented by the refugees as a way of engaging with the impossibility of legally traveling to their desired destinations. Broadly inspired by Martina Tazzioli’s recent book *The Making of Migration* (2020) – a thorough biopolitical reading of contemporary forced mobilities – and in conversation with the existing literature on the Balkan Route, we interrogate the ways in which the consolidation and the endless transformation of *The Game* is the result of the interplay between the informal refugee mobilities across these borders and the institutional forces and geopolitical narratives that have resulted in new walls, camp archipelagos, smuggler networks, increasing humanitarian interventions and new relationships between Balkan countries and the EU. In line with the body of literature identified as the Autonomy of Migration (see, among others, Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; De Genova, 2017), which tends to analyse “mobility as the engine of socio-economic transformation” (see Casas-Cortes, 2021, p.1), Tazzioli’s book consists of a convincing attempt to rethink – via an intersectional approach influenced by feminist, postcolonial and decolonial perspectives – the authorities’ conceptualisation and the management of migration in Europe. The specific biopolitical approach ‘from below’ developed in *The Making of Migration* has been subjected, in recent debates, to close scrutiny and some criticism for how it conceptualises, for example, the migrants as opposed to the

broader population and the ‘non-migrants’ (see Scheel, 2021 and McNevin, 2021). At the same time, it has been recognised as a key contribution to the understanding of forced and circular migrant mobility as a strategy of dispersal and as a form of migrant governance implemented by the authorities in several European contexts and along several borderscapes. (See, among others, Casa-Cortez, 2021) More specifically, we find Tazzioli’s conceptualisations of the making of migration particularly useful in our analysis of The Game for her suggestion to shift the focus “from the government of mobility to government through mobility” (2020, p.120) and for her emphasis on the ways in which refugees are targeted and managed by migration policy by keeping them on the move constantly and exhaustingly. Forced mobility, in Tazzioli’s analytical framework, is thus to be appreciated as a strategy of deterrence which literally *takes away the spatial terrain* from the refugees via constant operations of dispersal, including different forms of harassment and the eviction from and the dismantling of makeshift camps and ‘jungles’ which represent a geography of support and survival for their informal mobility.

Our project in the region has provided the background knowledge, as well as the primary and secondary sources, which support our conceptualisation of the workings of The Game. The primary sources are an outcome of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina since 2017, which included extensive participant observations in the camps and border regions and over 50 structured and semi-structured interviews with refugees residing in institutional and/or makeshift camps, with representatives of camp management and with members of humanitarian organisations operating along the Balkan Route. In particular, we have conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with refugees who have previously resided in Serbia and are now living in Western Europe after successfully engaging in The Game, as well as humanitarian organisations, around the topics of the mobility and accommodation of refugees in Serbia. In the context of makeshift camps, fieldwork itself had a precarious nature, with ‘interviews’ that took place as very informal conversations, often in groups (see Authors, 2021). The names of participants have been either omitted or changed due to the sensitive nature of the topic.

The article thus starts with a brief account of the recent development of the Balkan Route, beginning from the 2015 ‘long summer of migration’ (Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020) and focusing on Serbia in particular; which is then complemented by an overview of the relevant literature and by some considerations on how the Route has been deflected and modified in the past few years. The following sections reflect on The Game as a term and as a practice, and on the ways in which its workings are related to the emergence (and disappearance) of makeshift camps and jungles along the relevant border regions, as well as the existing and emerging institutional camps and border strategies of the countries involved. The Game, in all its ambiguities, is discussed as a ‘grey area’ in the governance of informal migrant mobilities (see Introduction to this Special Issue), a grey spatiality resulting from the interplay between the intended and the unintended consequences of migration policies, but also from the tactical responses of the refugees and those who help them ‘to go through’. The article concludes with a few considerations on how to conceptualise The Game as part of the ‘making of migration’. In relation to the interplay between failed and successful attempts to cross the border, painful pushbacks, and endless hope to finally make it, we propose to consider The Game as both the result of specific strategies of forced mobility by the authorities *and* as a powerful manifestation of the conditions and the fields of possibility for thousands of refugees along the Balkan Route today.

2. The Balkan Route

The 'long summer of migration' began in 2015 when an unprecedented number of refugees driven by war and violence from the Middle East entered Europe overland via what became known as the 'Balkan Route' (Thorpe, 2019). After initial entry into the EU via Greece or Bulgaria, refugees typically travelled through Serbia to then re-enter the EU via Hungary or Croatia (Pastore, 2019). Their journey was expedited by a semi-formalised corridor that was opened across the region, supported by organised trains and buses from one country's border to the next, which temporarily legalised an already existing informal route (Lukić, 2016). Upon entry into Serbia, '72-hours papers' were given to those who declared their intent to seek asylum after reporting to a dedicated centre; however, in practice these papers became a way for them to legally transit through the country and make their way into the EU (Beznec et al., 2016). The result was an unprecedented multi-state-supported refugee corridor to Western Europe that assisted, despite the difficulties implied by the journey, the passage of nearly 900,000 refugees via Serbia (IOM, 2015).

The situation in the region began to quickly change from September 15, 2015, when the Hungarian government announced the erection of a barbed wire fence along its border with Serbia, which de facto closed that passage. The following day, refugees began gathering at Serbia's borders with Croatia (Grubiša, 2018; Župarić-Iljić & Valenta, 2019). In response to this new emergency, a regulated system of transport was arranged between Croatia and Serbia, with buses and later trains, taking refugees from Serbia's One-Stop Centre in Preševo and the 'Belgrade hub' to the Croatian border (Beznec et al., 2016). Upon arrival in Croatia, refugees were transported to reception centres and then onto the Croatian-Hungarian border until its closure in mid-October 2015 (Bužinkić & Hameršak, 2018). This additional closure caused another change to the Route, and refugees began crossing the Croatian-Slovenian border with the support of organised transport and reception facilities (Bužinkić & Hameršak, 2018; Šelo Šabić, 2017). In mid-November 2015, North Macedonian, Croatian and Serbian authorities jointly began profiling refugees according to country of origin, and excluding those who did not come from Afghanistan, Syria or Iraq, a procedure that became gradually more restrictive over time. After the start of profiling, a 'counter corridor' was established in which, through a string of pushbacks enabled by police beginning in Austria, refugees were returned to Serbia (Hameršak & Pleše, 2018, p.22). On March 8th, 2016, Slovenia made the first step to close the 'authorised' corridor along the Balkan Route by shutting its border crossing with Croatia, a decision mirrored immediately by other governments in the region (except by Serbia), for fear that refugees would become stuck in their respective countries (El-Shaarawi & Razsa, 2019; Šelo Šabić & Borić, 2016). Following this, the EU-Turkey Deal was signed on March 18th, 2016 (Weber, 2016), in this way sanctioning the formal closure of the Route (Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020). With the official 'closure' of the Balkan Route, legal pathways into the EU became scarce, the only legal option for refugees in Serbia was to wait to travel into Hungary via a dedicated 'transit zone', but this option was lengthy and unpredictable (UNHCR, 2019a). While it is difficult to identify the exact origin of the term itself, this lack of legal pathways is arguably what caused The Game to emerge as the common method of entering the EU from Serbia's borders. The Route has therefore remained informally open and active, and has continued to represent, and still does as we write, an organic and constitutive element of informal refugee mobilities across the region, as well as of the authorities' strategies to keep them 'on the move' as a way to govern their presence in this part of Europe.

The prospect of refugees forging their own informal pathway into the EU has led to the construction of fences and solid borders throughout the Western Balkans since late 2015, actioned by Hungary, Bulgaria, Austria, Croatia, Slovenia, and North Macedonia (see Milivojević, 2019, p.44).

In addition, there have been continuous reports of severe violence and pushbacks by Hungarian and Croatian authorities toward refugees (MSF, 2017; Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020). These actions against people on the move have made The Game increasingly dangerous and periods of immobility within Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina prevalent (Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020). During the brief period in which the corridor was ‘open’, the approach of the Serbian authorities was generally described as empathetic and humanitarian, as no violence was employed at the borders, transits and stays (when possible/necessary) were enabled, and the work of NGOs, including aid distribution, was allowed in public spaces (Beznec et al., 2016; Šelo Šabić, 2017). These actions were supported by the establishment of the One-Stop Centre in Preševo, the role of Belgrade as a transportation hub for refugees passing through, and the re-opening and establishment of institutional camps to provide accommodation to refugees throughout the country (Minca et al., 2019).

The period of a semi-formalised corridor effectively brought about a temporary suspension of the EU border regime that had been methodically set into place in the region since 2002 (El-Shaarawi & Razsa, 2019). An aspect of this regime entailed the *externalisation* of the EU’s border, which consisted in the exporting of EU border practices to non-EU countries in order to “coordinate the management of migration flows” (Milivojević, 2019, pp.11-12). Therefore, even prior to the start of the 2015 ‘long summer of migration’, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina – as candidate countries for EU membership – had already been under significant pressure to harmonise their border policies with those of the EU (Milivojević, 2013; Beznec & Kurnik, 2020). The closure of the Route signalled that the EU had decided to ‘securitise’ those migrations, with each country along the Route having a role to play (Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020). In a process that Milivojević (2019, p.40) describes as “orchestrated by the EU and performed by the non-EU states”, Serbia, and later Bosnia-Herzegovina became tasked with halting irregular movement into Western Europe, making them into ‘buffer zones’ or ‘purgatories’ for the many refugees seeking to enter the EU via The Game (Minca et al., 2019). As a result, many refugees have been stranded on the Route for extended periods of time, during which they often prepare for and make attempts at The Game. As of December 2020, nearly 17,000 refugees still remain in the region, waiting to go north (UNHCR, 2021a).

The ‘closure’ of the Balkan Route and the militarisation of surrounding EU borders altered Serbia’s governance over refugee mobility and its camp system considerably. With the increasing length of stay by refugees in Serbia, they became predominately housed in permanent institutional camps managed by KIRS. Even after residing in the country for years, most camp residents consider Serbia as a place of transit rather than a final destination (Bobić & Šantić, 2020, p.10; Galijaš, 2019, p.79). Those who decide not to reside in institutional camps often live in makeshift camps and jungles, established by both smugglers and refugees to support informal mobility toward Western Europe (UNHCR, 2018). These spaces are either located in forests along the border areas or within abandoned buildings, three notable examples being the so-called Belgrade Barracks, the Grafosrem Factory in Šid, and the ‘Old Brick Factory’ in Subotica, which we discuss later in the article. As of December, 2020, there were 6,400 refugees registered in Serbian institutional camps and an estimated 1,400 refugees residing outside of the camp system (UNHCR, 2021b). Many refugees are in fact unwilling to live in the camp system and prefer to live in makeshift camps as they find this option closer to their end goal of successfully completing The Game and reaching Western Europe¹.

¹ Interviews with former member of Médecins Sans Frontières (hereafter, MSF) and with members of Save the Children and No Name Kitchen (hereafter, NNK), an international humanitarian organisation working along Serbia’s Western border with Croatia.

Despite its official closure in March 2016, the Balkan Route has continued to be used informally and has been subject to constant rerouting, derouting, and endless twists, as refugees and smugglers have been endlessly seeking out which borders present the best chance of succeeding at The Game. In 2018, the Route deflected into Bosnia-Herzegovina from Serbia after attempts to cross the Serbian-Croatian border became increasingly difficult and violent. Subsequently, and silently, a new corridor was also created across Albania and Montenegro into Bosnia-Herzegovina (Bobić & Šantić, 2020; UNICEF, 2019). The sharp increase of arrivals into Bosnia-Herzegovina was driven by the idea that this country's North-Western border with Croatia would be more penetrable and the passage less difficult. This idea has since shifted, as violent pushbacks from Croatia became increasingly frequent, and the conditions of the makeshift and institutional camps in Bosnia-Herzegovina were found to be deplorable (Minca & Umek, 2020; Walker, 2019). While this new articulation of the Route has consolidated in Bosnia-Herzegovina, it has also remained very active in Serbia. In 2019, there were 30,216 new migrant arrivals in Serbia, compared to the 16,165 registered in 2018 (UNHCR, 2019b). Following the impacts of COVID-19, Serbian authorities gathered over 2,000 refugees living in public makeshift spaces and transported them to institutional camps (UNHCR, 2020), which led to nearly 9,000 people being housed in camps during the state of emergency. This is the highest number of refugees to have been housed within Serbian camps since the start of the 'crisis'. Perhaps one of the most unknown articulations of the Balkan Route is that across the Serbian-Romanian border: reports of increased use of this route began during the summer of 2018 (Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020) and has frequently been mentioned within recent interviews as a more common point of departure².

3. Literature on the Balkan Route

In recent years a rich and articulate transdisciplinary literature on the Balkan Route has emerged. A significant part of this body of work has focussed on the once semi-formalised corridor and the subsequent stages of the Route (see, among others, Bužinkić & Hameršak, 2018; El-Shaarawi & Razsa, 2019; Kilibarda, 2016; Lukić, 2016) and the relation between the management of the Route and EU border externalisation and securitisation within the Western Balkans (Bobić & Šantić, 2020; Cocco, 2017; Milivojević, 2019; Šelo Šabić, 2017, Stojić Mitrović & Vilenica, 2019). Other work has investigated the geographies of the Route (Kallio et al., 2019; Minca et al., 2018, 2019; Minca & Umek, 2020; Obradovic-Wochnik, 2018; Šantić et al., 2017; Squire, 2020; Umek et al., 2019), and the relation between the Route and several urban realities (Bird et al., 2020; Mandić, 2018). Additional interventions have instead analysed the forms of violence perpetrated along the Route (Ansems de Vries & Guild, 2019; Arsenijević et al., 2017) and the question of smuggling (Achilli, 2018; Brunovskis & Surtees, 2019; Mandić, 2017; Perkowski & Squire, 2019).

More specifically, El-Shaarawi and Razsa have addressed the complexity of the Route through what they call an 'assemblage of movements', and the various "nodes of mobility/immobility: self-organized refugee camps, squatted migrant hostels in Athens, or the urban parks of Belgrade, spaces where refugees gathered to regroup, to share information, and, often, to hire movement facilitators" (2019, p.96). These forms of mobility occurred across countries adopting diverse approaches to migration. According to El-Shaarawi and Razsa, along the Route and its different 'nodes' the refugee

² Interview with representative of Klikaktiv, a Serbian humanitarian organization working within Belgrade and various border regions and a former member of MSF.

should no longer be seen as a passive receiver of humanitarian aid, but rather as a force within the Route itself making such informal mobilities possible. Adopting a different perspective, Hameršak and Pleše (2018, p.22) have classified the Route as a space of ‘mobile detention’, highlighting the need for further research into its mobile details, for instance by closely investigating the journey itself together with the routes, the paths and the means of transport used. Similarly, Mandić (2018) suggested that the Serbian ‘transit camps’, which arose from 2015 onward, served a “‘hot potato’ system of migration, developing rules and institutional cultures aimed at urgently processing individuals at the expense of any capacity to integrate them into the society’s urban environments” (2018, p.3). For Mandić, once the corridor became more formalised in Serbia, the system “sought to process migrants as quickly as possible, bypass all cities (especially Belgrade), and urgently deliver them across the Croatian border, pre-empting any integrative steps into the bridge society” (Ibid.) – with the Preševo One-Stop Centre playing a key facilitating role.

As noted above, the concepts of border externalisation and securitisation in South-Eastern Europe have been explored by a number of scholars in relation to the emergence of the Balkan Route (Bobić & Šantić, 2020; Cocco, 2017; Milivojević, 2019; Šelo Šabić, 2017; Stojić Mitrović & Vilenica, 2019). Most comprehensively, Milivojević’s recent book *Border Policing and Security Technologies* (2019) has analysed the mobility of refugees across the Western Balkans throughout the so-called ‘crisis’ and the subsequent efforts on the part of Serbia and other countries in the region to regain control over mobility. Comparably, Stojić Mitrović and Vilenica (2019) have emphasised how a specific ‘borderscape’ has been produced by and for the EU within the Western Balkans through the implementation of various spatial mechanisms aimed at governing refugee mobility and forcibly imposing a form of circular mobility within the Route to delay their arrival into the EU. Other work has instead explored the concept of ‘transit migration’ within the Serbian context, where the term ‘transit country’ is often used despite the extended periods of stay by refugees. Lukić (2016) for example has argued that refugees predominately use the Serbian camps as places to rest during their journey, and demonstrated that while living in the camps, ‘asylum-seekers’ maintained contact with their social networks made of other refugees and smugglers to prepare their onward journey. On this point, Stojić Mitrović (2019) has observed that, despite Serbia having arguably maintained a humanitarian approach to migration compared to its neighbouring countries, it is possible that more individuals would have been interested in staying had there been greater access to asylum procedures; however, Serbian politicians have been eager to support the view that Serbia is a transit country despite the permanence of thousands of refugees in its camps (see also Kilibarda, 2016, p.44).

An important contribution to the study of the Balkan Route has emerged from work in political geography. Minca, Šantić and Umek’s project on the geographies of the camps in Serbia (Minca et al., 2018; 2019; Šantić, 2017) has reflected on how the archipelago of institutional camps informally enables the irregular mobility of refugees toward the EU, as well as on the close and symbiotic relationship between this archipelago and the numerous makeshift camps which contribute to the production of the conditions necessary for this informal mobility to persist and often succeed. Also adopting a geographical lens, Squire (2020) has argued that by looking at the ‘nonmovements’ (movements that come together in places, through the actions of everyday people and without formality) of refugees, some of the ‘hidden geographies’ of the crisis may be exposed, suggesting that scholars should seek to understand the diversity of refugee experiences along the Route through testimony. Davies et al. (2019, p.224) have highlighted the relevance of makeshift camps in Belgrade and the biopolitical strategies of exclusion within the capital city’s urban makeshift camp known as ‘the Barracks’, which housed refugees during the winter of 2016/17 and gained the attention of the

global media. Along the same line, Obradovic-Wochnik (2018) has researched the governance of public spaces associated with the presence of refugees in Belgrade, such as ‘Afghan Park’ – a central hub for refugees to connect with smugglers and humanitarian aid – and ‘the Barracks’ and their subsequent demolition due to the Belgrade Waterfront project, together with the spatial and urban politics related to the increased wave of migration through Belgrade. Bird et al. (2020) have instead examined the existing relationships between the various institutional camps in Serbia, as well as urban and makeshift housing – particularly focusing on the naming practices of institutional housing and on how the EU’s geopolitical influence may have manipulated camp locations within the country.

Drawing from this literature, this paper reflects on the The Game, also to respond to El-Shaarawi and Razsa’s (2019) call to contribute to the understanding of the complexities of the Route and the various movements and nonmovements which it is comprised of. While much of the reviewed literature has mentioned or acknowledged the existence of The Game (sometimes without using the term itself) along the Route, it has yet to be conceptualised in-depth. By conceptualising The Game, we hope to demonstrate how the informal mobilities along the Route, and in Serbia in particular, are not merely a broader manifestation of the externalisation of EU borders or the result of the violent implementation of border policies by the countries along the Route. Instead, our analysis of The Game intends to place particular emphasis on a term coined by the refugees themselves and illustrative of the ‘grey spatialities’ that ‘make the migrations’ in this specific region and along this informal route. While being illustrative of the difficulties and the violence along the Route, The Game will hopefully allow us to highlight the importance of the spatial tactics performed by the refugees in response to the ambivalent strategies implemented by the authorities.

4. The Game

“I don’t know exactly why they call it the game, but I think it must be like a goal, where when you’re playing a game, you level up, and every time you do something you go to another level. It’s the same thing for us, that every country we cross is like a new level.”

“The entire purpose of [refugees] being there [in Serbia] is going on Game and trying to get into Europe. I think a lot of them are under a lot of pressure from their families, from themselves, from the circumstances, because it is not a very nice or comfortable life that you are living regardless of whether you are within or outside of the camp. They have been on the way for such a long time already, this feels like the last step, they know that if they manage to cross Croatia and Slovenia, they are safe, they’ve reached their goal.”

As shown above, ‘to try’ or ‘to go on Game’ is how refugees, and those that work with them, often describe their intention to enter the EU irregularly along the Balkan Route. While the aforementioned academic literature, with few exceptions, has largely overlooked the term and the deeper meaning it may convey to refugees, The Game has emerged as a key term in our interviews and many reports released by international humanitarian organisations operating along the Route, as well as in articles, notes, blogs and websites produced by journalists, volunteers, and NGOs. According to an Oxfam Joint Agency Report:

³ Interview with Fahim, Afghanistan, Male, 22, former Krnjača Camp resident.

⁴ Interview with member of NNK.

“The people who are moving through the Balkans, with cynical humor, call their efforts to continue their dangerous journey the ‘game’, a cruel ‘game’ where safety and protection are replaced with violence and intimidation from people in authority. As they attempt to move to a place of safety, people are forced to take enormous risks and suffer abuse at the hands of people smugglers, brave freezing temperatures in winter and negotiate unknown and dangerous terrain, including forests and fast-flowing rivers. This is an often terrifying situation where beatings, dog attacks and robbery are rife, leading to serious injuries and even death.” (2017, p.2)

MSF, in describing how violence is repeatedly operated on the refugees during their long journeys, explains that:

“Over and over again, they are violently pushed back from EU borders nursing wounds allegedly perpetrated by EU member state border forces in an endless cycle of border crossings they have dubbed ‘The Game’. Regardless of their reasons for being in Serbia in the first place, they are left extremely vulnerable while waiting in camps, detention centers and informal settlements where they are repeatedly brutalized and neglected and ultimately made invisible by migration policies that push them onto more and more dangerous routes. [...] From Turkey to Italy these irregular border crossings are known as ‘Games’. Those who are pushed to play them must survive a series of violent events and endure abuse before reaching their long-awaited destinations.” (2017, pp.3-4)

The Game is thus described by several organisations as a term that refers to perilous journeys and a whole geography of makeshift and institutional refugee camps, border controls and pushbacks, smuggling networks and international support, audacious and sometimes lethal crossings of mountains, forests, rivers and fields along the Route. While we endorse these descriptions, at the same time we believe that the term also incorporates something else, that is, an element of vitality reflecting the refugees’ desire and determination to move further, to face a huge amount of risk and possible violence in order to reach their destination. It also reflects their ‘singularity’ (Tazzioli, 2020) in this process, which is their individual capacity and intention to fully and deliberately engage with this perilous journey and to deflect, with their own decisions, the Route and its endless obstacles. Refugees are also supported in this process by various other actors involved in The Game, such as smuggling networks, humanitarian organisations, and even, indirectly, local authorities. The Game is also a way to resist the ‘dispersal’ of the refugee ‘multiplicity’ (ibidem) – often the result of the authorities attempts to block, intercept or delay their mobility – by adopting ‘spatial tactics’ which endlessly reinvent the Route, twist it in ways that respond to the changing border situation and, at the same time, endlessly open new passages, new itineraries, and new ways to progress through. This resistance is often manifested in two distinct ways. On the one hand, refugees may refuse to be identified or registered within the official camp system, something that is frequently suggested by the smugglers as they guide refugees on what camps or sites to move to in order to be closer to their own networks, and increase their chances of crossing the border (see Mandić, 2017; Thorpe, 2019). On the other, many refugees tend to utilise camps where identification is not required, and mobility is entirely free. These forms of resistance allow refugees to approach The Game in line with *their* plans and the range of possibilities offered by the changing circumstances at the border. According to an interview with a former member of MSF:

Most of the [refugees] that I spoke to living in squats, were unwilling to move to camps. I asked them that specifically. I don’t know out of how many people that I asked, I never got a yes. Because remaining in smuggler accommodation was closer to their end goal than anything else. Any squats that

they were living in, they understood that they had more freedom, in terms of reaching out to a smuggler, and continuing onwards.⁵

In contrast, some refugees move (or attempt to move) to specific institutional camps where smuggler networks are located⁶. In addition, there are those with enough funds to afford the so-called ‘good smugglers’, who have the networks and the means necessary to move people into the EU very quickly, often through what refugees refer to as the ‘taxi game’⁷. Jamshid⁸, a former resident of Krnjača camp in Belgrade, revealed that the cost of a smuggler depended on what type of game you went on: “the more you walk, the less you pay, and vice versa.” Those who do not have enough money or need to find a new smuggler, may choose to stay in an institutional camp until they can save enough funds and/or find a new opportunity to try The Game. Mahsha, another Krnjača former resident, described why her family stayed in the camp for three years: “[w]e didn’t have any other choice, we had to. The routes were very hard. And my husband was very sick so even if we wanted to go, we would have to walk a lot, and cross forests, and we were not able to do that ... we ran out of money... the routes are very hard, and smugglers are demanding a lot of money.”⁹

As we will observe in the following sections, The Game also incorporates an element of hope, since most refugees seem to be convinced that, despite all the difficulties, one day they will succeed, they will go through, and that the whole assemblage of border securitisation, combined with the operations of smuggling networks and humanitarian organisations is, after all, nothing else but a violent, painful, hypocritical... game (see Ansems de Vries & Della Torre, 2019). In Serbia, Belgrade has played a key role in regional manifestations of The Game, acting as an international transportation hub for the formal and, especially, the informal mobilities of refugees. While the role of Belgrade has changed over the years, the capital remains a stopping point where refugees can procure various services before travelling to the border regions, a meeting point between refugees and smugglers, and/or the primary residence for some between their various attempts at The Game¹⁰.

It is not known how many people succeed in The Game every year along this route, but certainly thousands do as confirmed by the partial and incomplete figures of refugees reaching Trieste, Italy, near the border with Slovenia – which since 2019-2020 has become a sort of terminal of the Route. In 2019, the number of irregular arrivals from the Balkan Route (all passing via either Serbia and/or Bosnia-Herzegovina) were estimated to be around 14,000 (Frontex, 2020). Within the first seven months of 2020 over 3,000 refugees were intercepted by the Italian authorities while walking towards Trieste and the surrounding region, and were received by humanitarian organisations locally (Rainews, 2020). What is interesting about The Game is that everybody seems to be aware of it, and, furthermore, that the apparatus of humanitarian aid and the securitisation of borders in the relevant countries appear to both disrupt *and* (silently) support this irregular mobility. What is the logic

⁵ Interview with former MSF member.

⁶ Interview with Save the Children representative.

⁷ The ‘taxi game’ is described by refugees and humanitarian organisations as one of the more expensive, as well as one of the more certain and safe options. Typically, a smuggler will organize a taxi to pick the refugees up once they walk across a certain border, they will then be driven to the next border, where they will walk across again and then be picked up on the other side, and so on.

⁸ Interview with Jamshid, Afghanistan, male, 25.

⁹ Interview with Mahsha, Afghanistan, female, 45.

¹⁰ Interviews with former MSF member and with representatives of Collective Aid – an international NGO working along Serbia’s Northern border region – and of Klikaktiv.

behind The Game and how can we read the role of authorities, smugglers, humanitarian organisations and refugees in 'making The Game'? Is The Game the result of, but also the response to, the grey areas of governance that have characterised the management of migration in the region since the beginning of the 2015 'long summer'?

This is where Tazzioli's work may help conceptualise The Game as part of a broader understanding of the making of migrations, and in particular of the role of forced mobility in the management of refugees through intermittent operations of dispersal including eviction and abandonment. For Tazzioli, "control at Europe's border zones is [...] about disrupting, deterring migrants' passages and at the same time containing the political visibility of migrants' presence. Fragmentariness and blurriness are neither fully the effect of failures nor the outcome of a deliberate state strategy: they stem in part from political controversies and in part from a non-interest and unwillingness in knowing too much and making the frontier too legible" (2020, p.59). This forms an 'opaque' area of intervention, which is manifested both by "the use of mobility as a political technology for governing unruly migration" (ibid., p.106) and by the state authority's strategic lack of recording nor identifying all refugees. The combined elements of humanitarian support offered in Serbia by national and international organisations, the active and the rather visible presence of smugglers in some of the key sites of departure 'to try The Game', the occurrence of pushbacks and the subsequent hospitality of the Serbian camps, as well as the non-intervention on the part of the police in many of the makeshift camps within the country's capital and border areas, and the presence of hundreds of unregistered refugees at any given time in Serbia, may be tentatively read through the lenses offered by Tazzioli's analytical framework. Let us follow a few more passages of her argument: "If mobility is not only an object of government but also a mode for managing unruly migration – by keeping refugees on the move – life and mobility should be considered together as fundamental stakes in the politics of migration. Thus, biopolitical questions about how migrant lives are governed, what power 'hold' is exercised over them, and what modes of making and letting die are at stake need to be supplemented with a reflection on how mobility is used as a disciplinary technique for managing migration and what hierarchies of lives are structured round it." (2020, p.106)

Taking Tazzioli's above statement into consideration, The Game can thus be seen as the manifestation of a disciplinary technique for managing the informal mobility of refugees as well as the makeshift spaces that support this mobility. However, The Game should also be seen as a responsive and tactical form of appropriation (and engagement with) on the part of the refugees of this very process of disciplining. While Tazzioli is certainly right in asserting that "through violent evictions, by constantly making migrants move and by obstructing access to asylum and rights, state authorities take terrain away from the migrants" (2020, p.117), at the same time, how can we conceptualise and better appreciate the forms of resistance and even the desire to go through, which are implied in how The Game is presented and put into practice by the refugees themselves? Perhaps we should understand The Game as a complex and ambivalent space of containment and resistance, a grey area of migration governance marked by the interplay and overlap of a specific set of formal and informal geographies. Containment, insists Tazzioli, "encompasses a series of strategies for limiting migrants' autonomous movements, not only by generating strandedness and immobility but also by keeping migrants on the move" (2020, p.121); however – and this is in our view a key passage for our analysis of The Game – "there are no actors that have an overwhelming gaze over the effective functioning of the border regime [...] In this sense, we can speak of partial ungovernability as the unstable outcome of a *will not to govern* as a political technology for handling migrants' presence" (2020, p.61 and p.65). This is also due to what she describes as 'the

incorrigibility of migration’, that is precisely the determination, the desire and the bodily and emotional investment on the part of the refugees to move beyond, no matter the cost. This is why we propose to read The Game not merely as the result of a subtle strategy implemented by the authorities to face an unstoppable and unruly movement and somehow manage its ‘troubling presence’, but also as a space of engagement and resistance, as a specifically grey border geography made by precarious but also powerful combinations of formal and informal spatialities and mobilities.

The informal nature of The Game has required us to resource intensive, extensive and repeated participant observations in a large number of makeshift and institutional camps. During these visits, we encountered many groups of refugees who were eager to discuss their failed attempts at The Game and the consequences of being pushed-back by border authorities, which were in some cases associated with severe violence. When asked to reflect back on the experience of trying for the Game, Fahim stated: “we definitely had stress, and you were anxious about The Game, but we also wanted to cross and that’s what we wanted to do.”¹¹ Notably, none of the interviewees expressed the desire to give up, convinced that their attempts sooner or later would succeed. A psychologist from Psychosocial Innovation Network (hereafter, PIN), an NGO working with refugees throughout Serbia, asserted that “my experience tells me that their need to continue their journey is an instinct to most of them, it’s not a desire or need, but to most of them, if not all, everything is subordinate to it, all decisions which are being made, revolve around the fact whether they will continue their journey or not and when.”¹² On several occasions, in different locations near Serbia’s borders with Hungary and Croatia, and Bosnia’s border with Croatia, we witnessed groups of refugees, at times even families with children, preparing to try The Game overnight. On one occasion, the first author met a Syrian family in Bihać, Bosnia-Herzegovina, who were starting their trip via the crossing of the nearby forests and mountains, with the hope to enter Croatia with their three young children who were wearing their backpacks as if they were going for a leisurely trip. The apparent normality of these moments compared to the extraordinary risks entailed by The Game felt both disturbing and hopeful, as it revealed the determination and optimism guiding refugees when engaging with the perilous journey. A representative of Collective Aid captured what we witnessed quite aptly: “usually they were full of hope, even if they were scared, the hope was first”¹³.

We have discussed elsewhere some of these testimonies and the ways in which The Game translates into a specific border geopolitics marked on the refugees’ body, at times in some very visible and painful marks (Minca and Umek, 2020). Here we focus instead on how The Game can be read as a manifestation of the making of migration as conceptualised by Tazzioli or, more specifically, a typical case of ‘grey’ governance by refugee mobility. As noted above, we conceptualise ‘The Game’ as a spatial tactic implemented by the refugees related to the actual impossibility of legally crossing the borders and to their extraordinary determination to engage with spatial interstices, twists and turns to the route, long waiting times, incommensurable personal risks, invisible networks of peers but also smugglers, violent pushbacks and ‘holes in the walls’; a series of spatial tactics that allow them, despite all the difficulties, to challenge the official border politics along the Balkan Route (for further analysis of the nomadic subjectivity of refugees, see Topac, 2019). We thus conceptualise The Game as a process characterised by the intentional and unintentional involvement and actions of several players, including state authorities and humanitarian organisations, a process related to

¹¹ Interview with Fahim, Afghanistan, Male, 22, former Krnjaća Camp resident.

¹² Interview with PIN representative .

¹³ Interview with Collective Aid representative.

what Tazzioli broadly defines as the governance-of-the-refugees-via-mobility, that is, as a form of (forced) mobility aimed at managing these irregular migrations across Europe. We accordingly understand The Game as the result of the intersection between broader political technologies aimed at governing migrant mobility *and* of a countermovement, that is, a series of tactical responses on the part of the refugees, which makes this term all the more valid in describing the ambivalence and the tensions related to these practices.

We can thus move to the punctual geographies marking ‘the making of the game’ - geographies comprised of borders, institutional camps, and humanitarian efforts, but also jungles, makeshift encampments, routes and deroutings, smuggling, and endless tactical shifts on the part of refugees. We will analyse these geographies by paying particular attention to forms of ‘governing-mobility-through-forced-mobility’, that is, to the political technology for coping with what Tazzioli describes as the incorrigible presence of refugees.

5. Borders, jungles, camps and The Game

As noted above, an important stream of the literature on the Balkan Route has focused on the process of externalisation and securitisation of the EU borders within the Western Balkans, and its impact on the mobility of refugees through Serbia following the 2016 official ‘closure’ of the Route. Stojić Mitrović and Vilenica (2019), in particular, have utilised the concept of ‘borderscape’ to analyse the related interventions of the authorities, as well as the refugees’ responses, and have argued that the European border regime “has transformed [Serbia] from a zone of unidirectional transit to a zone of (forced) circular movement. Forced circular movement, from camp to camp and across the territories of the [Western Balkan] nation-states, is used to enact a form of mobile detention” (2019, p.553). Considering this, Stojić Mitrović et al. (2020) have suggested that the Route should be more accurately described as a ‘Balkan Circuit’, a circuit resulting from systematic pushbacks, pull-ins, irregular counter-mobility by refugees and the difficulties in accessing asylum throughout the region.

This circular mobility within Serbia is aptly narrated by a representative from Klikaktiv regarding recent forced movements from Serbia’s northern to southern borders:

“We had actions at the end of October, November and December [2020] by Serbian special forces going to the squat and collecting people and taking them to the camps. But they have always taken them to the camps in Preševo, at the border with Macedonia....First, they would go to the squats, bring them to this camp, and then from this camp they are pushing them back to Macedonia. This is one of the reasons people get scared when the police are coming, because they know they will end up at these camps on the Southern border and there is a big chance they will be pushed back.”¹⁴

This depiction of the borderscapes made of forced circular movement is in line with our understanding of The Game as part of the broader political geographies produced by the ‘making of migration’ in Serbia and along the Route more generally. These geographies are made by ‘hard’ borders and the related technologies, pushbacks and selective closures, but also tactics of informal mobility on the part of the refugees, supported by a pervasive network of smugglers and, indirectly, by the humanitarian organisations in and around the camps and the decision of the Serbian

¹⁴ Interview with Klikaktiv representative.

authorities to not intervene in their journey toward the border. The Game, however, is also to some extent the result of the deliberate decision not to track or even identify some of those refugees who do not wish to be incorporated in the institutional camp system or decided to leave the camps. The partial lack of identification and the emergence of makeshift camps or jungles are therefore key elements in the reproduction of The Game and of its geographies of mobility.

According to Tazzioli, the opacity and chaotic implementation of migration policies is a manifestation of a mode of governing through non-governing, which forces migrants into specific (bureaucratic and administrative) channels by fundamentally restricting their autonomy of movement. Nevertheless, “at the same time migrants’ presence does also trigger states’ frantic attempts to regain control over them” (2020, pp.64-65). This is why the idea of circular movement is particularly relevant here: because it suggests that the combination of makeshift and institutional camps, of intervention and humanitarian support, but also the abandonment of refugees on the part of the authorities, may be seen as a strategically opaque form of governing-through-non-governing. This is also why taking mobility as an analytical lens in the case of refugees’ forced circular movements “means coming to grips with ephemeral spaces: in fact, the spaces of control and refuge that are the outcome of the clash between bordering mechanisms and migrants’ struggles for movement are thoroughly precarious and subjected to an uneven temporality” (2020, p.103).

The Game has been – and remains as we write – supported by many such ‘ephemeral spaces’, and in particular by a geography of makeshift camps and people sleeping rough in improvised and semi-mobile ‘jungles’ near the relevant borders for days or even weeks (for more on the Calais ‘jungle’, see Agier, 2018). Here, in these informal sites, refugees experience the direst conditions, yet they retain the possibility to try The Game when the opportunity arises (see Thorpe’s excellent account of these precarious spatialities, 2019). ‘Jungles’, as a form of makeshift encampment, have been qualified by Davies et al. (2019) as “improvised encampments often found on waste ground in more rural or semi-urban settings. The term is often used by undocumented migrants to describe makeshift spaces designed to provide temporary shelter whilst trapped at pinch-points on migration routes; ... They are inherently heterogeneous assemblages, shifting and changing with the ebb and flow of marginalized people on the move.” (p.224). In a recent article, Jordan and Moser (2020, p.3) have suggested that the most recent research on makeshift camps has focussed on the Jungle(s) in Calais (see, among others, Millner, 2011; Rygiel, 2011; Davies et al., 2017; Katz, 2017; Mould, 2017a; 2017b; Agier, 2018; McGee & Pelham, 2018; Sandri, 2018; Hicks & Mallet, 2019), while the makeshift camp geographies along the Balkan Route have been investigated by a relatively limited body of work (however, see Minca & Umek, 2020). Notably, following the official closure of the Balkan Route in 2016, these spaces have become more prominent along Serbia’s northern border regions, as well as within the capital city of Belgrade, and directly contribute to the reproduction of The Game (Minca et al., 2019). While there are dozens of minor informal encampments throughout the country at any time, here we would like to briefly reflect on the role played in the implementation of The Game by three of the most prominent makeshift camps in Serbia: the ‘Belgrade barracks’; the Grafosrem factory in Šid; and the ‘Old Brick Factory’ in Subotica.

The Belgrade Barracks, a cluster of abandoned buildings behind the capital city’s central train station, was transformed into a makeshift camp by refugees in the Spring/Summer of 2016 (Obradovic-Wochnik, 2018; Authors, 2019). The camp lacked basic necessities, which became especially problematic during the harsh winter weather conditions in January 2017 when refugees began heating the indoor spaces with wood-burning fires and bathing in sub-zero temperatures outside. At its peak in January 2017, around 2,000 refugees (all men) resided within the barracks

(Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020). When the first author visited the site in that period, the interviews revealed that many refugees had returned to the Barracks after having failed The Game. A few of them were injured and others were sick due to the terrible weather conditions. Entering the Barracks, one was surrounded by a spectral atmosphere produced by the smoke of the improvised fires and by many refugees walking wrapped in their blankets with faces blackened by the fumes. However, despite these rather desperate living conditions, the refugees were assertive in refusing to be accommodated in official camps, since they wished to be free to try The Game in the coming days or weeks. The Barracks were in fact an important hub for the informal mobility of these refugees and represented a key point of contact with smugglers and the networks of other refugees on the move. Before the eviction and demolition of these buildings in May 2017, the authorities had hardly intervened in the Barracks, save for some mostly unsuccessful attempts to convince residents to move into institutional camps (Obradovic-Wochnik, 2018). At the same time, the presence of humanitarian organisations in the Barracks was largely inhibited by the same authorities. This was a typical case of ‘governing-the-refugee-movement-through-non-governing’, a form of strategic abandonment which however allowed the refugees to freely move north and attempt The Game with the authorities’ tacit consent. A few months later, we visited the institutional camp of Obrenovac, about 30km away from Belgrade, where many refugees were brought after the eviction of the Barracks. We found that most of those relocated refugees were no longer in Obrenovac, and were likely attempting The Game, elsewhere along the Route (or had already succeeded in reaching their desired destinations). We also encountered some former Barracks residents during our visit to the institutional and makeshift camps close to the border with Croatia, who had unsuccessfully tried The Game several times, a confirmation of the often perverse circularity of the forced mobility of many along the Route.

Located in the border regions of North-Western and Northern Serbia respectively, Grafosrem factory in Šid and the ‘Old Brick Factory’ in Subotica, also played key roles in the reproduction of The Game during their existence. Grafosrem is an abandoned printing factory on the outskirts of Šid, near the Croatian border, a city that has long represented a key hub for irregular border crossings along the Route (Thorpe, 2019). The Grafosrem ruins became a popular makeshift encampment for refugees attempting to cross the border in 2017. According to official reports, between 200-250 refugees were found to reside within that space from weeks to months at a given time (UNHCR, 2017). On 22 November 2019, one of the largest police evictions of makeshift spaces in Serbia took place in Šid, including the Grafosrem factory. This sweep apprehended roughly 150 people, who were subsequently dispersed to institutional camps throughout the country (Are you Syrious?, 2019). If we adopt Tazzioli’s analytical lenses of the making of migration, this is another case in which “We can speak of choked mobility to give a sense of how migrant mobility is not only the object of restrictions, nor is it just spatially controlled; rather, control over mobility is intertwined with a certain governing of migrant lives. In this sense, it can be argued that all politics of mobility is always simultaneously a biopolitics of mobility.” (2020, p.117). Nevertheless, this management of mobility is often met with countermovements by refugees. A member of NNK reflected upon how the dismantling of Grafosrem changed the nature of The Game in that region:

“After that, it was hard to go on Game because they didn’t have a place to gather. They got chased by the police anytime they showed their faces anywhere on the street...They got transported to all parts of the county like to Preševo, to the furthest border you can imagine. They slowly came back anyways, a lot of them stayed in the camps, some came back to jungle, it was a jungle structure behind Grafosrem that then developed.”

The makeshift camp in the abandoned ‘Old Brick Factory’ in Subotica, near the Hungarian border, is another useful example of how this strategy is operationalised. The ruins of the former factory adjacent to the train tracks a few kilometres outside of town, served as a settlement for refugees from 2011 until late 2017 and was intended as a starting point for The Game where smugglers and refugees would wait for days or weeks before attempting to cross the Hungarian border (Turudić, 2017). During our visit to the factory on a freezing winter’s day, we found small groups of refugees living in very precarious conditions, while many others were returning to the premises walking along the tracks after having received a food parcel from unauthorised local humanitarian organisations. Despite several evictions, the refugees returned many times to the broken walls of the Brick Factory, since it represented a key passage and gathering point for the organisation of their informal journey towards their desired destinations. While some of these makeshift camps may no longer exist now or in the future, other makeshift camps and jungles will inevitably arise to serve the needs of The Game.

The biopolitics of mobility mentioned by Tazzioli was thus manifested in Serbia by a policy that combined the humanitarian support of the refugees in the camp system with their selective abandonment to the direst living conditions in makeshift camps and, at the same time, the ever-present possibility of evicting them and forcing them to enter an official camp, or simply to leave and move along. A 2018 UNHCR Joint Agency report noted that the makeshift camps within Serbia “were all hazardous regarding both health and security and the population sleeping rough was exposed to a variety of health, protection security risks without proper access to basic services. The sites were deemed unsafe and inappropriate for living from a humanitarian standpoint as well.” (2018, p.39). According to Tazzioli, “in many contexts, migrants are not just chased or taken away: even if their presence is tolerated, they can be the object of police harassment, be excluded from access to social services and rights, and be deprived of what in Calais [...] migrants used to call ‘liveable places’ (*lieux de vie*).” (2020, p.117). There have been numerous recent reports of Serbian authorities evicting, dismantling and destroying these spaces, along with the belongings within them (Are you Syrious?, 2019; No Name Kitchen, 2019). Despite the periodic occurrence of these sweeps, destruction of these spaces, and the movement of refugees to southern institutional camps, refugees often return and rebuild, at times with the support of humanitarian organisations. During the winter, it is common for refugees to move from the jungles/makeshift camps to institutional or more permanent camp structures and pause their attempts at The Game as the extreme cold is not conducive to the already perilous journey (Minca & Umek, 2020). Despite the fact that most of the literature on camps tends to analyse makeshift camps and institutional camps separately, some recent work has observed the reliance and movement between these two camp realities in Serbia (Martin et al., 2020). The makeshift camps are often established at the edges of institutional camps, where the non-registered refugees are sometimes able to access electricity and water, while those within the camp may access services provided to makeshift camp dwellers, such as quick medical aid or cooked meals. Further to this, refugees often choose to spend their time socialising within makeshift spaces (Stojić Mitrović & Vilenica, 2019). The communities that form within these spaces also enable access to various smuggling networks, an essential element in the preparation of The Game (Carter-White & Minca, 2020).

While most refugees in Serbia are waiting to attempt The Game, there were those (predominately families) who have been waiting to officially cross the border with Hungary via what was known as ‘The List’ (Minca et al., 2019). This document was the only legal way for refugees to enter Hungary from Serbia and became effective in September 2015 when Hungarian border authorities decided to regularly admit a reduced number of individuals from the Horgoš and Kelebija’s transit zones (Stojić

Mitrović et al., 2020, p.48).¹⁵ The List was thought to be managed by a group of ‘community leaders’ in Serbia who apparently communicated in informal ways with the Serbian and Hungarian authorities the supposed chronological order of who should enter Hungary. According to our interviewees, this list lacked any transparency. In 2015, between 100-300 people were allowed to pass daily, however this number gradually decreased over time, with only 1 person per transit zone in 2018 (Korte, 2020; Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020; Turudić, 2017). After years of waiting and inconsistencies in ordering, many refugees, especially families, who would have preferred to reach Western Europe via The List, began attempting The Game. For Tazzioli (2020, p.122), this kind of “strategy of dispersal [...] is combined with exclusionary criteria of access both to the camps and to the asylum procedure. The institutional channels of the asylum are at the same time a humanitarian trap for migrants – as demanding protection entails leaving one’s own digital trace and involves a spatial fixation – and what states try to restrict access to, preventively hampering some migrants from submitting the asylum claim”. Accordingly, The Game may be read as the result of such exclusionary criteria of access to asylum (in Hungary and Croatia), and legal pathways to the EU from Serbia, and the refugees’ resistance towards what they perceive as a humanitarian trap and the associated ‘spatial fixation’. The List additionally served as a way for KIRS to justify longer stays within the institutional camps and discourage The Game (Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020). What emerged in our interviews is that The List de facto allowed thousands of refugees to officially stay in the camps waiting for their admission to Hungary while in reality they were using this time to save money, procure new smugglers and/or attempt The Game several times. Darin¹⁶, a Kurdish refugee who previously lived in Krnjača camp, described that when he arrived in Belgrade with a family he was subsequently added to the The List. However, he stated: “I didn’t care that much about The List... I didn’t want that long time waiting.” Even though he had reached Serbia with the help of a smuggler, after a few failed attempts trying to cross the Croatian border, he decided that he would use his time in Serbia to establish a new network and find someone more knowledgeable for this part of the route: “My deal with him was until Germany, but when in Serbia, I realised he couldn’t do much, and I said okay that’s enough. We didn’t work together anymore.” Darin stayed in Serbia for 6 months before connecting with a new smuggler, who through phone conversations guided his group of four in trying The Game along the Serbian-Bosnian border. After three nights of walking, and various ordeals within this time (a friend falling sick, the police moving them back across the Serbian border), Darin and one friend eventually crossed into Bosnia, where he stayed for three additional months before finally reaching his final destination in Germany. His journey to Western Europe lasted a total of 16 months.

This ability of refugees to pause, prepare, and adjust to the changing living and travelling conditions is in fact part of the structure of The Game in itself. Not only do refugees have to adapt to their own personal circumstances, but they also have to adapt to the changing geopolitical conditions. For example, according to a NNK member:

“When Corona started to get serious in Serbia everybody was forced into the camps. It’s interesting because you have these challenges that come from the circumstances like Corona, an eviction, more border controls or new police forces arriving in Croatia, and then [the refugees] adapt, and they

¹⁵ The operation of ‘The List’, initially paused in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, has now officially ended due to the European Court of Justice’s ruling that Hungary’s practice of placing refugees in transit zones along its southern border is illegal (Deutsche Welle, 2020).

¹⁶ Interview with Darin, Kurdistan, Male, 22.

slowly find ways. [...] They are playing a game with police basically, sometimes they win and sometimes they lose and they constantly have to adapt to what the game is throwing at them”.¹⁷

The Game has therefore become the only actual field of possibility for refugees-on-the-move in Serbia and along the Balkan Route, the only tactical response to the new geopolitics of borders that has not only prevented them from “pursuing their original journeys and migratory projects” but also, literally, taken any “legal, material and terrain away from them” (Tazzioli, 2020, p.126).

6. Endgame

In Trieste, Italy, during one warm evening in August 2020, anyone could meet several groups of refugees, mainly composed of young men, hanging out along the beautiful waterfront of this Adriatic city, together with a crowd of tourists and residents, all looking for some relief from the heat. The refugees seem to enjoy that setting and somehow blend into the urban landscape. They look rested and relatively relaxed. They all arrived via the Balkan Route. They all tried The Game and succeeded. Every day the police in Trieste intercept new groups of refugees walking along the main roads after having crossed the Slovenian border and take them to dedicated hospitality centres. Most of them have attempted The Game via the new route in Bosnia-Herzegovina coming from Serbia, often after being stranded for months in Serbian camps or having failed numerous attempts to move North.

The Game, as we hope this article has shown, may thus be seen as a ‘grey area’ in the governance of informal migrant mobilities along the Balkan Route. It is the result of the combination of broader politics of migrant dispersal, of different interventions and competing strategies of the authorities at the most diverse levels, of the increased presence of smuggling operations and, of course, of the response, resilience and determination of the refugees themselves, who are aware of the fact that, in the end, despite all the risks and the obstacles, thousands of them manage to go through every year, as the new arrivals in Trieste confirm. Is arriving in Trieste the Endgame? In part it is, since upon their arrival in Italy most refugees are incorporated into the humanitarian system of hospitality and enter the EU machinery of identification, relocation, asylum protection, but they are also met with new forms of dispersal and, at times, even repatriation. Some of them continue to further destinations, others simply disappear after a few days. But the circularity of migrant mobility within the EU is not the topic of this article, and it represents to some extent, a different ‘game’.

Much more could have been said about the refugees’ direct experience of The Game and about how it is openly resisted but also silently supported (in diverse and often uncoordinated ways) by the border authorities along the Balkan Route. In the limited space of this intervention, however, what we have tried to highlight is the importance of The Game in understanding the ‘making of migration’ along this informal corridor, and in Serbia in particular. Despite the fact that this term has been largely overlooked by the relevant academic literature, or mentioned with negative undertones by many non-academic reports focussed on the Balkan Route, we nonetheless believe that taking The Game seriously may help to appreciate the refugees’ tactical appropriation and understanding of the broader ‘geopolitical games’ played by the EU and the different governments involved in the region on their own lives and bodies; games which include forms of containment and dispersal, of control and even brutal violence at the border, but also strategic abandonment and lack of support.

¹⁷ Interview with NNK member.

This article represents an initial exploration of the messy field that makes up the biopolitics of mobility along the Balkan Route. Our analysis of The Game also intends to contribute to the existing literature on the Balkan Route by providing a useful lens for further investigation of what has been and continues to be an extraordinarily important process of informal mobility. Finally, we believe that The Game deserves to be considered for all its important implications because it is a term that has been coined, and continues to be adopted, by the refugees themselves when describing their perilous journey. It is a term that certainly incorporates the tribulations and the uncertainty to which refugees are subjected, but that also hints at the vital capital of hope, desire and tactical resistance that compels them to try again, and again, convinced that one day they will succeed.

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