




## Full Length Article

## Geographies of migrant mobile containment along the Balkan Route

Lucija Klun Turk<sup>a,b</sup>, Claudio Minca<sup>a,\*</sup> <sup>a</sup> Department of History and Cultures, Alma Mater Studiorum – University of Bologna, Via Guerrazzi, 20, 40125, Bologna, Italy<sup>b</sup> Slovenian Migration Institute, Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Novi trg 2, 1000, Ljubljana, Slovenia

## A B S T R A C T

This article examines the spatial and temporal dynamics of migrant 'entrapment' in the Una-Sana Canton, a border region between Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia. A substantial body of scholarship has shown that journeys along migratory routes do not only consist of straightforward movement, but also involve stopping and waiting, as well as episodes of frantic hypermobility. This article focuses on a particular 'passage' along the Balkan Route, where these two dynamics converge as migrants become stranded while remaining frantically hypermobile. Through ethnographic work, we trace and analyse the complicated patterns of exhausting circular mobility experienced by three migrant families. Between frequent attempts to cross the border irregularly and seek international protection in Croatia, and pushbacks from the Croatian police, these migrant families have found themselves 'trapped in movement'. We argue that this is the result of a key strategy of deliberate 'mobile containment' enforced by border authorities, which prevents people on the move, including families with children, from accessing the protection they seek. By addressing and analysing different instances of such mobile containment, and providing a preliminary mapping of the trajectories involved, we hope to help illustrate how border enforcement strategies along the Balkan Route may imply forms of slow violence that rely on migrants' desire and imperative to move on.

## 1. Stranded

June 2021, Una-Sana Canton, Bosnia-Herzegovina. About forty migrants are living in two large, squatted houses near the Croatian border. Most of them are families with children. At around 9pm, a car comes speeding up the muddy road and parks near the squats. A family from Iran – two parents and two children – step out of the vehicle. Everyone cheers and approaches them: "What happened? Where have you been?" Apparently, they had left that same morning, at around 5am, entering Croatia at around 6am, only to be pushed back by the Croatian police, who drove them 30km north and ordered them to return to Bosnia across the 'green border'. They walked for some hours and then took a taxi back to the makeshift camp. The children are tired, but happy to be back 'home', the parents worried and angry, and the mother – addressing nobody in particular – asks: "Why again?"

First author's fieldnotes, June 2021

This snapshot evocatively illustrates the situation of many migrant families who have found themselves trapped in border regions along the Balkan Route in past ten years. Since the 'closure' of the semi-humanitarian corridor briefly opened during the so-called 'long summer of migration' (Hess & Kasperek, 2022) in 2015 and extending into early 2016, there has been no legal mechanism for most refugees to access the EU and seek protection. In the spring of 2016, most of the

countries along this informal migration corridor chose to block the transit of people-on-the-move – some even building border walls of various kinds (see, among others, Beznec et al., 2016; Korte, 2020, 2021). The most direct consequence of this decision is that, every year since, thousands of migrants have attempted what they themselves refer to as 'The Game'. According to Minca and Collins (2021: 1, 2), the Game denotes a set of spatial strategies "implemented by the refugees as a way of engaging with the impossibility of legally travelling to their desired destinations" in Western Europe, strategies that are supported – directly or indirectly – by various facilitators, as well as by local camp authorities, and humanitarian organisations. In practice, the Game often involves an odyssey of informal border crossings by walking through forests, fording rivers, climbing border fences, jumping trains, hiding in trucks or procuring taxi services via smugglers.

This article builds on the above understanding of the 'Game', framing it as the product of various manifestations of what we term a strategy of *mobile containment*. The latter concept draws on scholarship that interprets contemporary border containment not as a means of stopping movement outright, but rather as a form of deterrence designed to slow it down – often with the paradoxical effect of exacerbating patterns of futile and circular mobility. More specifically, our approach addresses the concern, noted in the relevant literature, that 'sedentary epistemologies' may not provide adequate analytical tools for apprehending modes of migration control and governance that are neither static nor confined to the nation-state. In geography, the emphasis on

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [claudio.minca@unibo.it](mailto:claudio.minca@unibo.it) (C. Minca).

mobility as an analytical framework for understanding broader societal, cultural, and political change has gained significant traction, particularly in connection with the mobility turn in the social sciences (see Adey, 2017, 2024; Cresswell, 2006, 2021; Cresswell & Merriman, 2013). Over the past two decades, the social sciences have subjected phenomena such as migration and tourism to intense critical scrutiny, advancing the adoption of a ‘mobility paradigm’ for their analysis (see, for example, Sheller & Urry, 2006, 2016). Reflecting on questions of mobility justice, Sheller (2018) argues that neoliberal forms of subjectivity are shaped not only by gender, race, and sexuality, but also by *power relations of mobility and immobility*, which she regards as key to understanding contemporary politics. From this perspective, “mobility and immobility are always connected, relational, and co-dependent, such that we should always think of them together, not as binary opposites, but as dynamic constellations of multiple scales, simultaneous practices, and relational meanings” (Sheller, 2018:1).

In line with this debate, Huysmans et al. have accordingly suggested giving “methodological primacy to mobility [...] not simply (to) dislodge the hegemony of sedentariness and stillness in our political imaginaries, but to attend to heterogenous devices that enact mobility” (2021: 35). This entails thinking about ‘containment beyond detention’ (Tazzioli & Garelli, 2018), or how people-on-the-move are actually *contained in movement* along migration routes and especially in border zones. Thus, here we adopt specific “spaces of transit as a vantage point” (De León, 2015: 2) and mobility as our analytical lens. By proposing to employ the concept of ‘mobile containment’ in this specific context, we therefore hope to illuminate dimensions of informal migration regimes that remain obscured by approaches grounded in sedentary (or state-based) categorizations of mobility (such as ‘asylum seeker’, ‘refugee’ and the like). In particular, we reflect on the effects of ‘mobile containment strategies’ imposed by certain border authorities on migrant families travelling with children along the Balkan Route.

The empirical basis for our analysis is extensive and repeated fieldwork in the Una-Sana Canton, a region in Bosnia that has, since 2018, seen a significant presence of migrants *en route* to Italy via Croatia and Slovenia (see Gentili et al., 2026). This canton has also been the site of some of the most violent episodes of border enforcement, including numerous pushbacks reported by various organisations and even acknowledged by the European Parliament (European Parliamentary Research, 2022).<sup>1</sup> By undertaking this analysis, we aim to contribute to debates in political geography and migration studies by extending the conceptualisation of ‘mobile containment’ – as enforced by border authorities along the Balkan Route – with particular attention to its effects on migrant families with children. The concept of mobile containment encompasses multiple forms of spatial harassment – from apprehension and forced mobility to abandonment and intermittent humanitarian assistance – enacted by the various authorities and organisations involved in the ‘making of migration’ in this region of Europe. Theoretically speaking, the critical cartographies we develop here support the claim that the circular *geographies of migrant mobile containment* they trace are generated by the complex interplay of ‘centripetal’ and ‘centrifugal’ forces operating across this borderscape, and other similar borderscapes along the Balkan Route. Taken together with the narratives of migrant families, these cartographies reveal how migrants have been simultaneously ‘pulled’ towards the border and ‘dispersed’ away from the border – through a messy yet no less debilitating sequence of apprehension, release, and abandonment in various permutations. This cartographic approach is particularly useful for highlighting the twists and turns experienced by migrant families navigating this informal route, where subtle and indirect forms of slow violence are frequently manifest. This is especially evident in border regions under heightened control regimes, where families encounter multiple overlapping

dispositives of mobile containment that often produce circular trajectories marked by repeated failed attempts to move forward.

The first section briefly outlines the geopolitical context of the Balkan Route and examines the situation at the border between Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, with particular attention to practices designed to deter rather than halt the passage of people-on-the-move. The second section situates the article vis-à-vis existing scholarship on the ‘management of migration through mobility, which informs our conceptualisation of mobile containment and the forms of direct and indirect border violence characterising the Balkan Route. The third section details our methodological approach, and the ethnographic research conducted in the Una-Sana Canton between 2018 and 2023. The fourth section presents our analysis of the empirical material, including maps that help to analyse and illustrate the convoluted geographies navigated by selected migrant families, and explores the practical consequences of the setbacks they encountered while attempting to reach Europe via this informal pathway. In the two remaining sections, we further engage with the concept of mobile containment for interrogating the multiple, indirect forms of violence embedded in the enforced circularity produced by specific implementations of this specific border regime, we conclude by reflecting on the contribution of this paper to the existing debates in migration studies and political geography focused on this very topic.

## 2. Managing migration through mobility

### 2.1. Forced informal mobilities along the Balkan route

Informal migration through the Western Balkans has a relatively long history (Kasperek, 2016) that goes back to when during the Cold War migrants used to enter Italy and Western Europe via the Yugoslavian border. Yet, even though migrants’ informal border crossings – and the associated strategies deployed by individual states and the European Union (EU) to prevent or ‘contain’ such mobility – predated the above mentioned ‘long summer of migration’, the contemporary geographies of the Balkan Route have, in many ways, taken shape since approximately one million people-on-the-move travelled the extraordinary humanitarian corridor that remained open in the region between mid-2015 and early 2016. This applies both to the migrants’ extensive ‘know-how’ regarding illegal travel and the smuggling services that have facilitated mobility along the Route in the intervening years, and to the new governmental strategies of containment that have emerged specifically during this period. These strategies include ‘repurposed’ bilateral readmission agreements between several Balkan countries and certain EU member states.<sup>2</sup> Although such agreements are not intended to apply to individuals who cross a border irregularly with the aim of seeking asylum, they have nonetheless frequently been used as (illegal) grounds for the return of border crossers, and in many cases as a de facto instrument of border deterrence, even against potential asylum seekers.

Readmissions in these cases clearly represent a breach of individuals’ rights, because they consist of “irregular returns of refugees or migrants to neighbouring states from within a state’s territory without any form of individual screening” (Breed, 2016: no page) and are prohibited under international law. Nonetheless, repeated illegal readmissions/pushbacks have been reported for years by migrants, activist groups, international organisations, journalists, and whistleblowers within the Croatian police, and have been recognised as human rights violations by

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/738191/EPRS\\_BRI\(2022\)738191\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/738191/EPRS_BRI(2022)738191_EN.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Bosnia-Herzegovina, for example, had signed a ‘readmission agreement’ with the EU in November 2007, in which it agreed to readmit third-country nationals who did not “fulfil the conditions in force for entry to, presence in, or residence on the territory of the requesting Member State”.

national courts in Italy and Slovenia, as well as by the European Parliament and the European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights.<sup>3</sup> Despite the considerable body of evidence, police forces and the respective national authorities have typically denied the existence of pushbacks (Davies et al., 2024), with the exception of the Croatian President, who acknowledged their occurrence in an interview with Swiss television in 2019 (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

Pushbacks were a common experience for most families with children on-the-move in 2021, when the first author conducted extensive fieldwork in the Una-Sana Canton. Arguably, the persistence of these expulsions was also made possible by the fact that they took place in borderland forests (with no witnesses) and usually left little or no paper trail. Pushbacks and other techniques of deterrence, according to Tazzioli (2019, 2021), fall into the ‘grey area of governmentality’, which relies on bureaucratic practices of partial or inconsistent recording, allowing state authorities to remain “unaccountable for pushbacks and irregular practices” (Tazzioli, 2020: 84). The Western Balkans have long held a distinct place in European migration governance: movement through the region has been effectively illegalized and heavily policed, but at the same time inherently permitted and understood as transient. There seems to be a tacit consensus among various actors in the region – government officials, humanitarian organisations, volunteers, and others – that people-on-the-move will (and must) move forward. For Minca and Collins (2021: 6), “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”. We will return to this aspect in the second part of the article, where we discuss in detail the concept of mobile containment as applied to this specific context.

## 2.2. Studying migration routes

A substantial body of academic work has indicated that journeys along migration routes do not consist primarily of (straightforward) movement, but also involve moments of stopping and waiting (Chattopadhyay & Tyner, 2022; Jacobsen et al., 2021), as well as episodes of hypermobility: being *en-route*, therefore, may entail multiple instances of both involuntary stoppage and involuntary movement. The literature on other migration routes (see, among others, Schapendonk et al., 2018; Hoffstaedter, 2019; Shum, 2022) has highlighted the increasingly violent and precarious conditions of clandestine journeys as a direct consequence of state policies and practices. Research on the routes from Central America through Mexico to the United States (see, for instance, Basok et al., 2016; Brewer et al., 2022; Chambers et al., 2021; Garrett & Sementelli, 2022) shows that migrants are frequently subjected to state violence in the form of direct intervention, deportations, and abandonment in hostile, weaponised natural environments, as emphasised in Jason de León’s work (2015) and that of many others (see, in particular, Brigden, 2018; Vogt, 2018). The interplay of repressive measures and abandonment, together with the occasional strategic inertia of Mexican and US border authorities, has rendered migrants increasingly vulnerable to violence perpetrated along the main migration routes by organised criminal groups seeking to control and clandestinely manage the northward journeys of these populations.

In *Lives in Transit: Violence and Intimacy on the Migrant Journey* (2018), Wendy Vogt shows how migrants and those who assist them must constantly navigate an ever-shifting route, often with extremely limited resources. This demands the continual translation of unreliable

or partial information into decisions and actions, requiring not only improvisation and a vivid geographical imagination, but also survival strategies that produce what Vogt characterises as “a dynamic transnational social space that complicates the governance of borders” (2018: 23). Yet, despite the violence that permeates the border zone, Vogt (2018) notes that migrants persist in their attempts to cross it. Even after enduring protracted periods of immobility and recurrent circular movements, their vision of the route remains one of eventual completion and success (see also Minca & Weima, 2026).

As far as the Balkans are concerned, scholars have proposed various ways to describe these specific aspects of the ‘Balkan Route experience’ as markers of most informal mobilities – for example, as “immobility en-route” (Collyer, 2010), or as forced circular mobility (Stojić Mitrović, M. & Vilenica, 2019) or the “fragmented journey” marking most informal mobilities (Jordan & Moser, 2020). Sites where people get stuck have been characterized as “bottlenecks” (Minca and Umek, 2020; also, Bezec & Kurnik, 2020), “buffer zones” (Altin & Minca, 2017), or “chokepoints” (Tazzioli, 2021). Meanwhile, more strategic forms of ‘stranding’ devised at the EU level have been labelled “hotspots” (Pallister-Wilkins, 2018). Analysing selected internal frontiers in the EU, Tazzioli described mobility as “a political technology for governing unruly mobility” (2020: 142), which entails governing by “keeping migrants on the move” (Ibid.: 146). She further argued that certain border practices obstruct migrants’ movements “not by fully stopping migrants but, rather, by forcing them to follow erratic geographies and to bounce across borders.” (2019: 8). On both the internal and external borders of the EU, however, control through coerced hypermobility tends to be enacted via informal mechanisms – such as pushbacks, the dismantling of makeshift camps, and inaccessible asylum procedures – rather than through formal measures like transfers and deportations. Accordingly, Tazzioli (2020) describes a broad panoply of practices that seek to control migrants’ lives and mobilities by evicting them from and dismantling their living spaces, using drones and cameras to surveil them as they walk, and chasing and driving them into the forest, thus repeatedly pushing them back.

## 2.3. Keeping migrants on-the-move

Despite the abundance of research describing the EU’s attempts to externalize and ‘seal’ its outer borders as a mode of ‘fortification’ (see Korte, 2021; Lavery, 2024), our extensive fieldwork in the Una-Sana Canton suggests that migrants on EU’s external borders are not simply stopped by impenetrable walls or strategies of walling (Carter-White and Minca, 2025). Rather, they appear to be caught in forced hypermobility across vast and relatively hostile borderscapes. For this reason, we focus here on specific ‘instances’ in the ‘making of migration’ along the Balkan Route – moments when migrants are “kept on the move” and “forced to remain in motion” (Huysmans et al., 2021: 70). More specifically, we examine the *circular mobilities* of migrant families ‘stuck’ in the border zone between Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, enduring a situation in which a border passage is both inevitable – since none of the families was able or willing to obtain asylum in Bosnia-Herzegovina and had therefore to ‘move on’ – and illegalized. We accordingly conceptualize migrant strandedness at this specific external EU border as part of a wider landscape of ‘zones of entrapment’, supplementing existing research on this topic (Zocchi, 2023) with ethnographic data from Una-Sana Canton and employing the concept of ‘mobile containment’ to interrogate the forced mobility experienced by migrant families along this particular stretch of the Route.

Furthermore, by illegalising migrants’ presence in one country (e.g., Bosnia-Herzegovina), while simultaneously illegalising their movement onward to another (e.g., Croatia), this type of governance harnesses ‘mobility’ as a political technology of containment and control. This yields conditions whereby migrants not only choose to move informally, but have no choice but to move constantly, repetitively, and circularly – getting hurt, exhausted, harmed, violated, and having their lives slowly

<sup>3</sup> See *Croatia’s Pushback Policy*. [https://www.ecchr.eu/fileadmin/user\\_upload/ECCHR\\_Croatia\\_factsheet\\_February\\_2023.pdf](https://www.ecchr.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/ECCHR_Croatia_factsheet_February_2023.pdf); also, European Parliamentary Research Service. (2022). *Addressing pushbacks at the EU’s external borders*. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/738191/EPRS\\_BRI\(2022\)738191\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/738191/EPRS_BRI(2022)738191_EN.pdf).

and 'invisibly' eroded in the process. We therefore consider migrants' attempts to cross the border irregularly – i.e., the Game – and the authorities' strategies to deter such crossings – through pushbacks and readmissions – as *mutually constitutive of the geographies of mobile containment* discussed here. Such geographies include not only places where migrants are stopped and spaces of forced (hyper)mobility, but also specific temporalities, given that the entrapments created by mobile containment extend to the unpredictable length of time each migrant spends in a border area before 'breaking out' and moving on to the next country further 'up' the route. In many ways, the form of mobile containment analysed here is actually a strategy of governance and deterrence that inherently counts on migrant agency and the related desire to move on.

The situation illustrated in the next section is not unique to this particular border zone. Scholars have observed similar dynamics in Calais (Aradau, 2016; Schwenken, 2014) Ventimiglia (Aru, 2021), and Lebanon (Nassar & Stel, 2019), where state authorities at times deploy strategic 'lawlessness' to manage migrants' persistent and disruptive presence, as well as their informal settlements. This body of research suggests that such (non)governing technologies should be understood as interventions-through-withdrawal – a mode of governance that displaces responsibility onto other states and actors through the multiplication (rather than the removal or absence) of rules and authorities involved (see also Leshem, 2025) According to the relevant literature, the EU channels substantial funds and human resources into its peripheries, where efforts to secure the external borders often involve obfuscated forms of violence, abandonment, and discontinuous surveillance" (Whyte, 2011: 18). However, such forms of "border governance", while leaving migrants some room for manoeuvre, also forces them to take convoluted and diverted routes, meanwhile becoming increasingly exhausted, injured, and disillusioned. Their spaces of life and movement are repeatedly disrupted, leaving them in the condition of having no clear juridical or material foundation, a situation of "spatial entrapment and legal destitution" (Tazzioli, 2020: 87). In dialogue with this literature, we will posit that our on-the-ground analysis reveals spatial entrapment to be especially acute for families, because people-on-the-move along this border are subjected to forms of mobile containment that impose profoundly debilitating conditions (Puar, 2017): they are exposed to a regime of governance that is difficult to decipher and exhausting to confront, since it involves the interplay of intervention and retreat on the part of the authorities – who sometimes forcibly take migrants to formal camps yet sometimes abandon them in the forest.

In order to analyse the geographical tactics deployed by migrants to travel the Route, along with the corresponding containment strategies implemented by authorities, we have drawn a series of preliminary maps of 'itineraries' within the border zone. Each map depicts the mobility of a single migrant family over a period of several weeks and illustrates the forms of mobile containment the family underwent in this region – mechanisms that confined these family groups to an extremely restricted border zone while simultaneously forcing them to 'stay-on-the-move'. Such mobile containment involved not only the infrastructures of mobility and informal settlements that the migrants relied on to survive and continue their journey, but also the forested area they used to render themselves relatively invisible – spaces which, paradoxically, contributed to the exhausting hypermobility that defined their travel experience. Our deliberately imprecise maps therefore consider not only the illegal pushbacks that drive repeated iterations of the 'Game', but also the physical geography that crucially shapes the context of mobile containment, including the dense forests along the 'green border' between Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, Mount Plješevica, and the rivers Una, Korona, Glina, Sana, Sava – sites where many people have lost their lives.

### 3. In the field

As already stated, we draw here on extensive ethnographic research conducted in the border area between Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, and specifically near the towns of Velika Kladuša, Bihać, Gradiška (Bosnia-Herzegovina), Slunj, and Karlovac (Croatia). In this context, the first author worked with 17 families as part of her doctoral research, mapping their itineraries over four months in the spring/summer of 2021. However, the analysis offered here concerns the mobility of three families, starting from the moment they left the temporary reception centre TRC Sedra in Bihać in May 2021. The first author initially met these families at the reception centre, which was closed a few weeks later (in June 2021), forcing residents to move to either TRC Borići or the border area. As it was the beginning of summer, considered by many to be the 'peak season' for forward movement, most families chose the second option. In fact, it was common for migrants to take advantage of the warmer months, the denser forests – with new foliage reducing exposure to security cameras and drones – and the school holidays to continue their journeys. The second author has travelled to Una-Sana Canton several times since 2018 – together with Dragan Umek – when part of the Balkan Route was diverted towards Bosnia, bringing thousands of migrants to Bihać and Velika Kladuša. During these visits, he has accessed both institutional and makeshift refugee camps, conducted extensive participant observation in border areas, had informal conversations with migrants, and held meetings with representatives of institutions and organisations involved in assisting people-on-the-move. His initial fieldwork was complemented by further visits in 2022 and 2023. These were conducted within the framework of a broader research project on the Balkan Route entitled "TheGAME: Counter-mapping informal refugee mobilities along the Balkan Route"<sup>4</sup> and helped to develop several considerations presented here in relation to the concept of mobile containment in this specific context.

Overall, the fieldwork largely focused on makeshift temporary dwellings – including squatted houses in rural areas near the border, 'jungle camps', and urban makeshift encampments. Makeshift camps represent a form of adapted and often improvised infrastructure, commonly found at key points along informal migration routes, particularly in border zones (Jordan and Minca, 2023a). In the Western Balkans, camps located in forested border areas have been built mainly from salvaged wood and plastic materials, but there have also been many 'rural squats', established in either abandoned or empty buildings – especially in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia, where the wars that, in the 1990s, led to the dissolution of Yugoslavia, generated the widespread abandonment of factories, residential houses, and even (partially) villages. At other times, migrants occupied new, often unfinished (holiday) homes, usually belonging to Bosnian citizens living abroad (Zocchi, 2023). In any case, makeshift camps are considered illegal settlements and are therefore exposed to varying "degrees of abandonment and intervention by state authorities" (Jordan & Minca, 2023b: 265). In our specific context, the Bosnian authorities either 'ignored' these settlements or attempted to 'undo' them, with interventions that included evictions, dismantling of makeshift infrastructures, and the burning of migrants' belongings – especially items essential for survival in border areas, such as tents, sleeping bags, shoes and backpacks. According to our interviewees, at that time, makeshift camps were generally ignored when official camps were full, but they tended to be dismantled when space became available in the formal centres.

The first author's data discussed here were collected either in or around makeshift camps (for example, by meeting families in cafés or shops in nearby villages), or in front of TRC Borići (in a playground or in the park). As field sites, makeshift camps are characterised as lacking certainties and explicit thresholds in which to ground a field strategy. This implies the need for substantial ethical reflection, especially when

<sup>4</sup> See: <https://site.unibo.it/thegame/en>

such settlements are inhabited by families with minors. Both authors made their position clear to all their interlocutors during the work in the field. However, the question of how to navigate a space dominated by the constant turnover of people-on-the-move – who repeatedly depart and return, and are distressed by their ongoing failure to succeed in the ‘Game’ – was shaped, for the first author, by the fraught interplay between ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’ practices encountered while investigating strategies and informal accounts of irregular border crossings. To minimise the impact of her presence, she met only with families with whom she had already established close personal ties.

Starting in mid-June 2021, the first author spent every weekend and most afternoons (with stints ranging from two to 19 h) in different makeshift camps – preparing meals, eating, playing with children, doing housework, and observing people’s frequent departures for the border and their defeated returns after pushbacks. She ultimately adopted a form of ‘serial hanging out’ at key migrant sites – a method that other researchers have employed on the Greek islands (Franck, 2022) and in the Western Balkans (Jordan & Moser, 2020; Minca, 2021). ‘Game tactics’ and accounts of past failed ‘Games’ were a constant topic of conversation among migrants, as was the collection of ‘Game equipment’, packing, and preparation for their perilous journeys. Specifically, the first author wrote extensive field diaries and conducted 26 semi-structured and conversational interviews with members of 15 families in English and Farsi (with a translator), – often while they were preparing to attempt the ‘Game’ or upon their return after a ‘failed’ iteration of it (i.e., a pushback). In the former case, participants sometimes shared their tactics and intended route via Google locations on their mobile phones. The first author also observed the equipment they took with them, which was often related to the specific ‘Game strategy’ they were planning to adopt (with or without smugglers, on foot or by car/bus/train, the expected length of the journey, the desired destination for seeking asylum, and so on).

In conversations following pushbacks, migrants were largely focussed on what had gone wrong and on the behaviour of ‘the pushbackers’ – that is, the Croatian regular or border police or, sometimes, the Slovenian police, or mixed patrols. After families had ‘gone’ to take part in the ‘Game’, it could take half a day, several days, or even over a week before they made contact again and reported back to those who had remained in the camp. This period of silence usually elicited a range of emotional responses among those waiting for news: hope (“maybe they are already in Trieste”), concern (“maybe something bad happened to them”), and longing (“maybe they made it to the EU, and we will never see each other again”). However, when families returned after a pushback, these emotions frequently gave way to a deeply enraged sense of unfairness.

Therefore, in the next section we propose an ad hoc mapping exercise to illustrate and analyse the particular type of entrapment that created, for some of these families, what Picozza describes as a state of “restlessness and stuckness at the same time” (2017: 237). Counter-mapping as a notion and as an analytical strategy has been increasingly adopted in recent migration studies, with a particular focus on the role of counter-cartographies (see, among others, Casas-Cortes et al., 2017; Casas-Cortes & Cobarrubias, 2018, Dalton & Mason-Deese, 2012). It is beyond our scope here to critically engage with this important literature, given our primary focus on the concept of mobile containment and the related geographies. The maps discussed in the next section should therefore be read for their heuristic value in relation to our main theme and, at the same time, for their analytical role in offering a visual representation of the itineraries of the families who participated in this study. They help in particular to identify a specific spatiality and the relationship between different sites in this border region.<sup>5</sup>

Our maps thus consist in an attempted counter-cartography aimed at

representing the direction of movement of the families (towards or away from the border, ‘up’ or ‘down’ the Route), the forms of mobility involved (walking, taxi, bus, boat, train, truck), the type of accommodation availed of (makeshift camp, reception centre, tent) and the actors involved (representatives of humanitarian organisations, activists, smugglers, other people-on-the-move, police, hospitals). Although the primary aim of this mapping exercise is to support the analysis of mobility patterns, it also seeks to offer a form of “minor cartography of vanishing refugees’ places” (Tazzioli, 2020: 203). The input for the maps was not directly requested of the migrants involved, but rather emerged from extensive informal conversations with the first author, as the families explained what they were going through – namely, the spatialities of mobile containment in which they felt trapped. The resulting inherently opaque cartography is both intentionally and un-intentionally imprecise. The unintentional ‘imprecision’ derives from the method used to collect the data, given that the first author decided neither to follow the families ‘during Games’, nor to map their exact GPS locations. Instead, the maps are largely informed by their plans and memories, implying that distances and routes are necessarily as well as deliberately approximate (“we walked for 5 h into Croatia”), even though we mark some of the cities frequently mentioned in their narratives (Bihać, Velika Kladuša). In addition, we employed intentional ‘imprecision’ in representing many elements on the maps, in line with our ethical commitment to avoid revealing sensitive information that could endanger vulnerable subjects en-route (on adopting a ‘disobedient gaze’ see Pezzani & Heller, 2013).

Accordingly, our mappings intentionally obscure the positions of certain camps and trajectories to protect the anonymity of families, conceal their exact itineraries, and render the routes they used un-identifiable. Although all these ‘camps’ are currently ‘out-of-use’, some still constitute viable infrastructures – the buildings are empty but have avoided demolition and might thus be used again as resting points in the future. The border line is likewise drawn imprecisely, in order to blur actual entry and exit points. Finally, this exercise is not merely an effort to expose the silences of more conventional migration maps (see Van Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2019), but also an attempt to expand the topologies of geopolitical imagination surrounding the informal mobilities of thousands of migrants along the Route and a way to make sense of the erratic mobilities at play in this context. We hope in this way to foreground illegalized movements across these territories and to illustrate the “multiple disjunctions between the spaces and the borders of sovereignty on the one hand, and the spaces of migration mobility and control (on the other)” (Tazzioli & Garelli, 2019: 400).

#### 4. (Counter-)mapping circular mobilities of containment

The first map (Fig. 1) serves to orient our reading of the remainder of the set. It shows the official and makeshift camps that the three families used (house icons), and the sites where they put up tents/over-night arrangements to sleep in the forest (tent icon): three formal camps, four makeshift camps, and four ad-hoc informal settlements. The migrants’ mobility is represented by a *full line* when they were moving in a vehicle (most often a police car) and by a disjointed line when they were on one of their walking itineraries. Pushbacks and accidents are also reported on the maps.

More specifically: a full house icon represents a reception centre or an asylum camp, an empty house icon a solid makeshift camp (a squatted house), a tent icon an ephemeral makeshift camp (tents, flimsy plastic constructions in the forest, or just ‘sleeping rough’ – sleeping bags on the ground); a full rectangle is a hospital. *Formal Camp 1*, as indicated on the map, was an old hotel repurposed as a temporary reception centre for asylum seekers and migrants, including families or vulnerable people-on-the-move (such as women and those with chronic illness or injuries). It was managed by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) with support from other international and local organisations. *Formal Camp 2* was a former student dormitory adapted to

<sup>5</sup> On this type of mapping exercise, see, for example, [https://anarchitektur.org/aa12\\_fuerth/aa12\\_fuerth\\_en.pdf](https://anarchitektur.org/aa12_fuerth/aa12_fuerth_en.pdf).

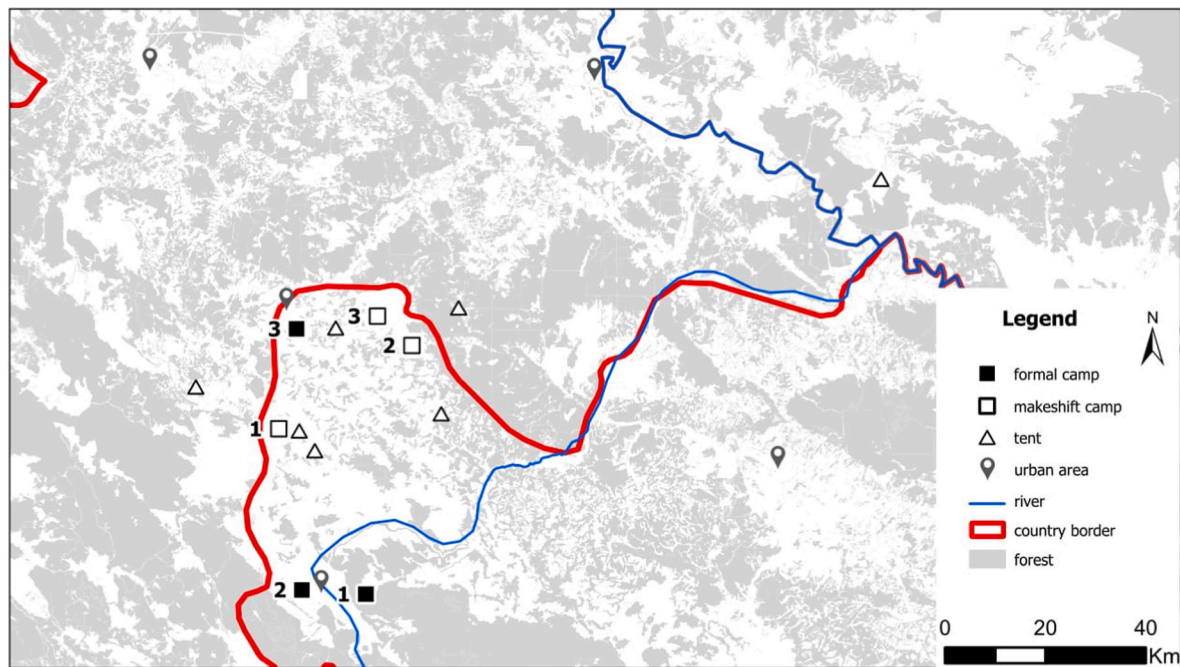


Fig. 1. Silent map of the border region related to migrant mobile containment (Source: Lucija Klun Turk & Matjaž Geršič, 2025).

accommodate families with children, unaccompanied and separated minors, and other vulnerable migrants. It was also managed by IOM. *Formal Camp 3* was a temporary reception centre consisting of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) containers placed in an open field. Although it was not designated for families or unaccompanied minors, it occasionally served as a temporary stop for families following a pushback, as it was the only camp in the northern region. These families were typically transferred to another camp shortly afterwards. *Formal Camp 4*, operated by the Ministry of Social Affairs, provided accommodation for unaccompanied minors and other separated children and was primarily staffed by social workers and education specialists.

*Makeshift Camp 1* was a rural squatted house, an unfinished brick structure with a roof and main entrance door, but no windows. Located approximately 1.3 km from the border and near a village with two small shops (where migrants could purchase basic supplies and charge their mobile phones and power banks), the site offered drinkable running water but had no electricity. *Makeshift Camp 2* corresponded to a squatted rural school, not long out of use, where tents were set up in two classrooms. While both drinkable water and electricity were available, there were no nearby shops, NGOs, or activist groups to provide essential supplies. *Makeshift Camp 3* was an abandoned village, where migrants occupied the houses that were still ‘inhabitable’ – structures with roofs and the needful for basic living – despite the absence of both running water and electricity.

We now turn to the analysis of three further maps (Figs. 2–4), each representing the trajectory of a single family, from when they departed from TRC Sedra in May 2021 through 30 June 2021. These families left on different dates, so the three maps cover periods ranging from 45 to 52 days. The maps capture only a snippet of these migrants’ longer journeys – both before and after June 2021, the families spent months or years entrapped in the mobile containment enacted along the Bosnian-Croatian border zone. What follows is therefore a partial yet nonetheless ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of their difficult journeys.

**Family 1:** The first family leaves TRC Sedra in mid-May 2021. The older son (aged seventeen), who is in close contact with other refugee families and knows the best ‘border locations’ decides where they are headed: to a squatted house near the Croatian border. The makeshift camp is approximately 30 km away. They only take the most essential

items with them: four backpacks of clothes and electronic devices. The younger children carry one backpack each, while the mother has an injured hip so does not carry any luggage. The two older children and the father carry the largest bags. They do not have the money to take a taxi to the makeshift camp, so they walk part of the way (1.) and only continue later with a taxi (2.). The taxi is overpriced, because carrying migrants is a risky business – drivers could be accused of human trafficking or smuggling if caught. When the family arrive at the makeshift camp (a rural squatted house), they are told that it is already ‘full’.

Makeshift camps are self-managed, but rooms still have fixed capacities; at this point in time, each room is accommodating two to three families. After a night spent sleeping rough, an activist brings them a tent (on the map, sleeping outdoors – with or without a tent – is always represented by a tent icon). The family attempts the ‘Game’ the following morning, at around 5.30am (3.), but they are apprehended on the first main road (after approximately 8 to 10 km) and pushed back across the green border. They return on foot along the same path they set out on in the morning (4.). Their tent is still there; the makeshift camp is now emptier, so they are assigned half a room. To gain some privacy from others sharing the space – and because there are no windows, and the nights can be windy – they pitch their tent inside the room. After a few days’ rest, they undertake the ‘Game’ for the second time (5.) but are caught after walking for a few hours (the exact distance covered is unclear). The police enforcing the pushback (6.) put them in a car and take them further north: approximately 13 km from the ‘point of contact’ and 34 km from the ‘point of departure’, i.e., the makeshift camp. While walking back (12.), one of the children accidentally injures a leg. The family call an international organization (IGO) responsible for medical assistance – the Danish Refugee Council – and are transported (13.) to the nearest formal camp, TRC Miral, which is not a designated ‘family camp’. Later that day, they are transferred to TRC Borići, where they begin a 10-day mandatory quarantine period. After 12 days of ‘quarantine detention’, they take a bus (15.) to a city further north. They spend the night behind a bus station (tent icon) and, the following morning, walk back (16.) to the makeshift camp. They discover that the camp has been raided in the meantime, and all their equipment is gone. Nevertheless, they embark upon another ‘walking version’ of the ‘Game’ (17.), which typically requires a week’s supply of food and water, a mobile phone, several power banks, and good shoes. Like most migrants,

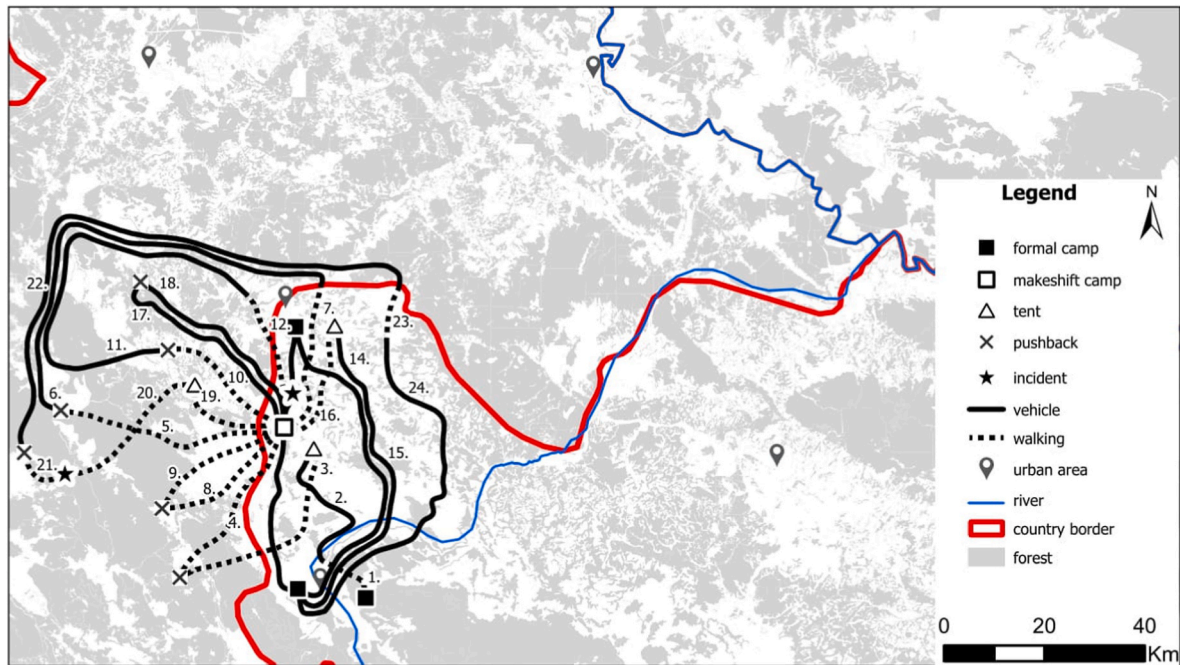


Fig. 2. Itinerary of Family 1: Mother, father, four children aged 19, 17, 9 and 7 (Source: Lucja Klun Turk & Matjaž Geršič, 2025).

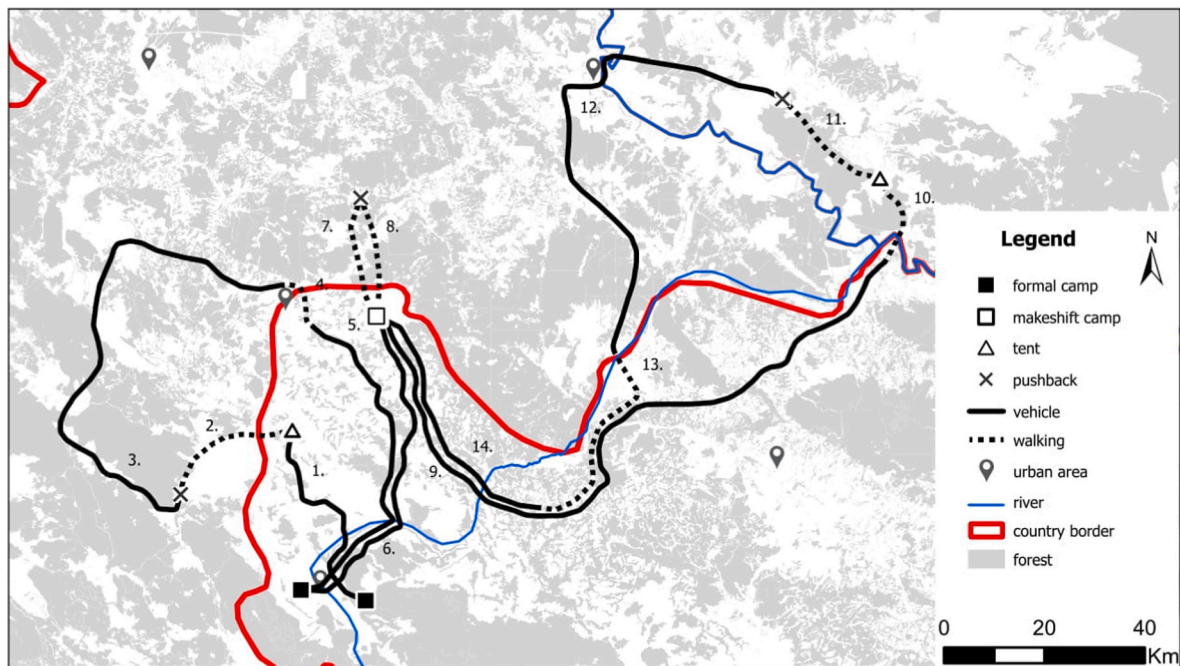


Fig. 3. Itinerary of Family 2: Mother, father, and two children aged 15 and 9 (Source: Lucija Klun Turk & Matjaž Geršič, 2025).

they only carry *one phone*, leaving their other devices with friends, given that during pushbacks it is common to be robbed by police of valuables and survival essentials like phones, power banks, and shoes. They are caught after nearly a full day of walking and driven back to the border in a police car (18.). They return (19.) to the makeshift camp on foot (approx. 1.5 h). After a few days spent resting and gathering equipment (new backpack, shoes, and blankets), they set out again for another shot at the ‘Game’ (20.). This attempt lasts three days, spent walking during the night and sleeping during the day. They have covered approximately 50 km when their only phone gets broken accidentally. As this was their sole navigation tool, they decide to ‘hand themselves in’ by walking to

the nearest road and waiting for the police, hoping to be accepted into the asylum procedure. Within half an hour, a police car arrives. They are pushed back around 40 km from their initial departure point. Exhausted and without a functioning phone, they ask a local resident to call an international organization. They request to be taken to TRC Boriči. Upon their return there on 30 June, they are placed under a new mandatory 10-day quarantine ...

**Family 2:** The second family leaves TRC Sedra in early June 2021. They take a taxi (1.) to a border area and settle in a makeshift camp shared by six other families, all Farsi speakers. This informal settlement is in an abandoned school building that offers many advantages: it is

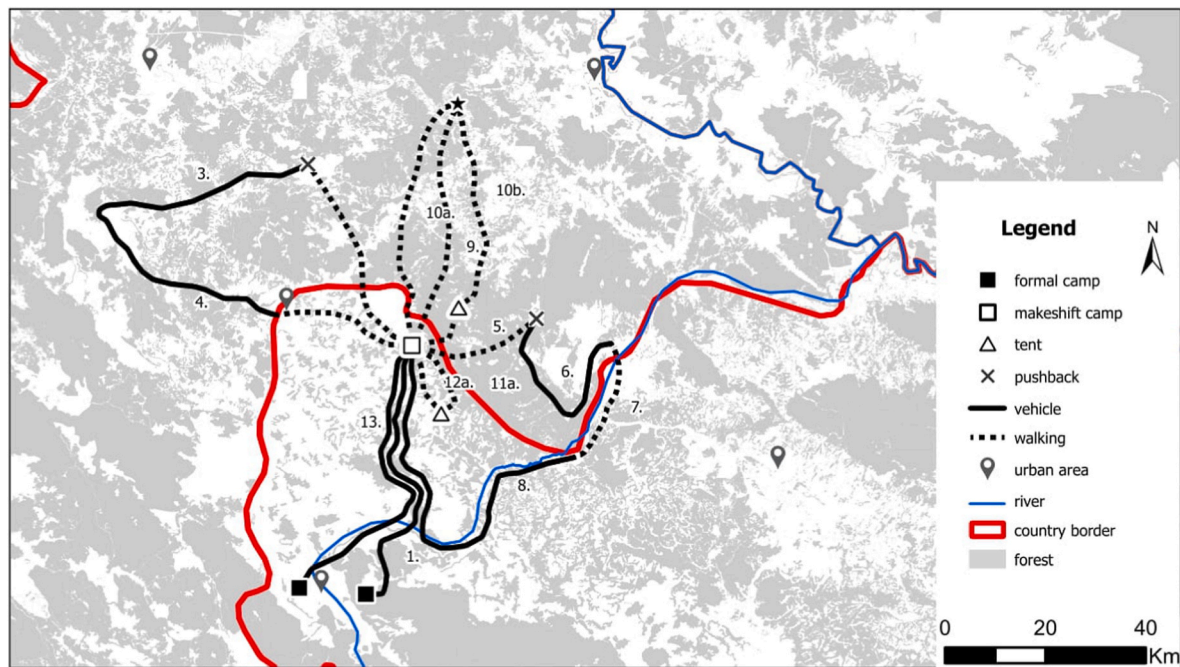


Fig. 4. Itinerary of Family 3: Mother, father, and two children aged 9 and 2 (Source: Lucija Klun Turk & Matjaz Gersic, 2025).

structurally sound, with functioning doors and windows, electricity, running water, a kitchen, and a supportive local community who allows these families to occupy the school. At the same time, however, it is distant from urban areas and receives no support from humanitarian organisations and activist groups. The nearest shop is several kilometres away, leaving families with extremely limited resources for surviving everyday life and attempting the ‘Game’. A few days later, ‘our’ family sets out for their first ‘Game’ (2.). After walking for a couple of hours (exact distance unclear), they are apprehended by police and driven (3.) to a ‘green border passage’<sup>6</sup> several kilometres to the east. From here, it takes them several hours to return to the makeshift camp (4.). After another few days, they try a new tactic (5.), this time heading eastward on foot. After a few hours, they are caught by the police and forced (6.) to cross back over the green border around 10–15 km further east. They begin walking back to the camp (7.), but after an hour or so decide to call a taxi (8.). A week later, they embark on another walking version of the ‘Game’ (9.) with a few other families from the same camp. After walking for an afternoon, they are spotted and approached by the police. They attempt to flee, but in the confusion of running through the forest, the family get separated; the parents and their 9-year-old child manage to avoid the police and hide, but they lose track of their older child. The 15-year-old (10a.) crosses the border alone without a telephone and tries to call his parents after making it back to the makeshift camp. Afraid to stay alone in the camp – especially concerned the authorities might register him as an unaccompanied minor and take him further away from his family – he spends the night alone outside, near the camp, before returning there early the next day (12a.). Meanwhile his parents and 9-year-old sibling spend a night searching for him on the far side of the border (10b.) and return to the makeshift camp the following day, hoping to find him (11b.). Once reunited, the family – exhausted – decides to stop attempting ‘Games’ for a while. They request a transfer and are relocated to Borici camp by IOM (13.).

**Family 3:** This family plans to attempt the ‘Game’ at the end of May, but their departure is delayed a week when the mother develops a urinary tract infection that worsens into a kidney infection. They finally

leave the camp by taxi (1.) during the first week of June and are dropped off near the border, where they sleep in a tent adjacent to a makeshift camp (based in a squatted rural dwelling). Activists retrieve their luggage (three large bags) from TRC Sedra and deliver it to their ‘border tent’ by car. Leaving most of their belongings at the makeshift camp, the family set out on the ‘Game’ (2.). Since they are travelling with a two-year-old child, they opt for a ‘stay tactic’: they walk approximately 7 km across the border and ask a passer-by to call the police. Hoping to be taken to a police station – having repeatedly requested asylum – they are instead pushed back (3.). The police do not return them directly across the border, but take them further north, about 10–20 km from their initial point of departure. After walking for about half an hour across the ‘green border’ (4.), they wait for a bus. Not having a charged phone to call a taxi or a humanitarian organization, they take a bus (5.) to the next city and request admission to a formal camp. After completing a mandatory 10-day health quarantine, they take a taxi (6.) to a makeshift camp in a mostly uninhabited village near the border. This village accommodates many families, particularly from Afghanistan, who live in abandoned houses or makeshift shelters made from branches, aluminium, and plastic. The family settles in one of the vacant houses. Two days later, they make another attempt using the ‘stay tactic’ (7.): they walk across the border – a 30-min walk covering about 1 km – and again ask a local resident to call the police. The police respond by ordering them back across the green border (8.). The family then decides to try a new strategy, this time together with another family composed of two parents and one child. They take a taxi to a more eastern section of the border (8.) and attempt to cross a river by boat assisted by a smuggler (9.). Once across, they walk for a few hours into Croatia (10.), sleep outdoors (tent icon on the map) for a few hours, and then continue walking westward (11.). After nearly 12 h in Croatia, they are caught by the police and pushed back again (12.) This time, the police drive them to the nearest border and instruct them to walk back to Bosnia-Herzegovina. They begin walking toward the makeshift camp (13.) but since they are exhausted, they call a taxi after a few kilometres (14.)

Overall, these three families stayed in three different formal camps (temporary reception centres), four makeshift camps, they pitched two tents (one in an urban area and one in the environs of a makeshift camp) and slept rough in the forest. Altogether they attempted ten ‘Games’ during the period under analysis. Seven of these were ‘walk’ or ‘full

<sup>6</sup> Green border is the informal term used at the time to describe a section of a national border normally covered by vegetation or part of a forest area.

jungle 'Games', whereby the migrants tried to cross into Croatian territory unnoticed and then enter Slovenia or Italy without being pushed back. One attempt was a 'boat&walk version', involving a smuggler who organized a river crossing. Two were 'stay versions', whereby the migrants walked a couple of kilometres into Croatia before spontaneously 'turning themselves in' and asking the police for asylum. The families suffered ten pushbacks, which means that none of them managed to break out of their mobile containment during this period. Five of the pushbacks were 'deterrent pushbacks', since the police drove the families a significant distance (between 30 and 50 km) from where they were apprehended, thus forcing them to walk a much longer distance to return to their shelter in Bosnia-Herzegovina. During the weeks under study, they collectively experienced one knee injury, a kidney infection, and one instance of separation of a child from the other family members. The families' mobile containment was intertwined with the actions of multiple actors: the Croatian police, two IGOs, international activists, one local NGO, bus and taxi drivers, other migrant families, local communities, and a (boat) smuggler.

### 5. The debilitating geographies of mobile containment

The mobile containment area analysed here covered approximately 7000 square kilometres – a relatively large expanse for a space of containment. This containment zone lacked the conventional control measures and infrastructures such as walls, barbed wire fences, or stationed guards that usually serve to restrict the movement of people across borders. Instead, it comprised a vast, rugged terrain, loosely bounded but intersected by a border line, constant surveillance, and police patrols. Rather than serving as an impenetrable barrier that kept people 'out' or entirely blocked their mobility, the border functioned more like a fulcrum – an axis around which movement intensified, oscillated, and converged. Migrant trajectories tended towards this axis, both in the form of attempts to cross it (the 'Game') and as a result of forced returns (pushbacks). Our maps have helped to analytically identify the containment zone and illustrate how it was effectively 'held together' by migrant mobilities concentrated around 'key infrastructures': borders, reception centres, makeshift camps, and urban areas offering humanitarian aid and public services such as hospitals. The section of the border closest to Slovenia played a particularly key part in this dynamic. In 2021, the Croatian police became notorious for their pushback practices, frequently involving physical violence and theft (Augustova, 2023; Augustova et al., 2023; Davies et al., 2022, 2024),<sup>7</sup> while the Slovenian police were perceived as more lenient. As a result, migrants increasingly favoured routes through the 'narrowest belt' of Croatian territory – which had not yet joined the Schengen Area – to reduce the risk of apprehension and pushback. Migrant mobility was also heavily concentrated in urban areas, particularly Bihać and Velika Kladuša, due to the presence of international organisations, reception centres, and other forms of support and shelter.

All three families had extensive prior (pre-2021) experiences with different asylum regimes in other countries along the Route. They had all tried many so-called 'waiting games' by applying for relocation in Greece and Serbia in the hope of entering the EU legally. All these attempts had been unsuccessful. Given the obstructed access to asylum procedures or visas they had experienced in these countries, the informal crossing of multiple borders remained their only option. The precariousness of their legal status did not begin in Bosnia-Herzegovina; rather, they had already endured periods of 'being illegal' and of

engaging in irregular border crossings in Serbia or Montenegro before encountering the specific geography of mobile containment discussed here. Arriving in Una-Sana Canton by illegalized means implied that this condition persisted during their time in this region.

After we are coming to Bosnia with a car and we say we need asylum here, to stay in Bosnia. So they give us a home, they give us ... they let us go to school, they let us work. Everything like a normal life. We was waiting for interview, they give us yellow card. Everything for the normal life you need, they give you. Bu then ... [sighs] ... I go for the first interview and they don't accept us. They block everything. They block the bank card, they block our school, they say you cannot live in the home, you must go to camp. / ... / So, we come camp Sedra, and we start trying to go Game. I think now 16 [times] I'm trying to go Game. And with the last one, it is seventeenth time.

[Junior member of Family 2, interview in June 2021]

As noted in the quotes, despite their precarious legal status, these families were unable to leave the country: the only legal option for departure was through IOM's voluntary return program, which was not a viable solution for these forcibly displaced families since they were coming from areas devastated by war and political repression. Once people were 'inside' the informal geographies of mobile containment, the only 'way out' was through irregular crossings of the heavily policed Bosnian-Croatian border. Attempting the 'Game' was, in fact, part of the broader 'net of legal impossibilities' in which migrants found themselves entangled along the Balkan Route.

So, we come here [to Bosnia]. We stayed one week in Sarajevo. After we came to Sedra camp [in Cazin]. And the camp was pretty empty. The first day we stay. Second day we go Game. Second day we go Game and they told us: "You go. Anytime you want, you can come back. It will be good." We go first game to Slunić. / ... / And for second game we try to go to Slovenia. In the middle of the way, they catch us. Same thing [both times]. Deport, take phone. We tried like that around ten or eleven time[s]. One time we tried we go to Croatia, they catch us, they deport us. We come back to Kladuša. We say, "Okay, we want to go back (to Sedra camp)." They say: "No transport." And the taxi wouldn't pick us up. And bus would be like "No migrants on the bus" ... So. The only option ... all day walking to Sedra. And we was pretty tired, we had no choice ... We start walking at nighttime. It was 12 (in the night) until 10 o'clock in the morning. We say "Okay, we will go one more hour and then we gonna relax." To sleep at least few hours and then we gonna go again. When we go, it was around 10 o'clock. A car came, we had no idea where it came from, how it came, it just hit my brother. / ... / So, because of that we stayed like six months in camp. His rib, his leg, his neck was broken. / ... / From his chest to his toe it was all gips [plaster casts]. But they didn't do anything for him [in terms of physical therapy]. And then my dad get angry about that and he say: "[Even] if I [have to] die, I will not come back to that camp." We go out. We go game again, my mom got sick. We was in border for over one month and my mom got sick. So we had no other choice, no other option. We go back to camp again, we stay for two more months and then we come back here again ... as you can see."

[Junior member of Family 1, interviewed in May 2021]

A family's chosen tactics for the 'Game' therefore largely depended on its size and composition (e.g., the number of children and their ages), their social and economic resources and, crucially, the time of year. Given that most migrants travel by night, families with children tend to travel in the warmer months (Benghellab et al., 2025), since temperatures in the Balkans in autumn, winter, and early spring pose a serious – potentially deadly – threat. As noted above, larger families with smaller children often adopt 'stay tactics', walking into Croatia for a few hours before approaching the police to claim asylum. From multiple informal conversations with migrants, it would appear that the success of this

<sup>7</sup> See also Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) monthly reports at: <https://borderviolence.eu/reports?category=monthly-report>. See also, Human Rights Watch (2023). "Like We Were Just Animals": Pushbacks of People Seeking Protection from Croatia to Bosnia and Herzegovina. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/05/03/we-were-just-animals/pushbacks-people-seeking-protection-croatia-bosnia-and-herzegovina>.

type of 'Game' depends not only on the 'generosity' of the police, but also on the availability of space at the Croatian reception centres.

If we want to cross the border, we need to walk 15 km. We live in [a] broken building and we need to walk for one and half hours, because we were trying (to cross) A LOT. We were coming [from pushback] / ... / after for one or two day we were getting rest and third day again we would try. Because we were saying "Now we are going, we are going!" But [we were] not. It was a fucking bad situation with the police. / ... / You don't know when the day will come (when you cross the border). Four years now we are waiting for that day. One day!!! You know all of my friend I know from Bosnia now went. All of them now ... Every time we go in the game, and I say "IT IS THE LAST TIME!!!" I hope it's the last time. But it's not last time. One time ...

[Junior member of Family 2, interviewed in July 2021]

Most of the measures do not confine migrants spatially. On the contrary, they render them even more mobile, forcing them to move frenetically to and from the border, in and out of camps, in constant search of electricity, food, and shelter.

They don't give us asylum here (in Bosnia): I am 4 years here. They know I don't make any problem. I didn't spend any time in police (station), I didn't fight, they know I'm a good person, ...but for my ask [request] for asylum they give negative. But they know I'm in a dangerous situation / ... / With children I now try maybe eleven times. And with children is so hard. It is SO HARD. For child it is so hard. I saw so many child in border, all black, in dirty places living, they don't have any good stuff. Just people who are coming from other countries and not Bosnia – they help. They give food, give shoes, give sleeper bag, tent. / ... / Because I am 24 years old and my wife is 26 years old and Shayan is 10 years and Zala is 2 years ... And right now, I don't have anything. I don't have one room for myself. And kids need a lot of things. They need clothes, they need food, they need ice-cream (laughs), they want to play ... They say "You bring me into this world, so what now???"

[Father of Family 2, interviewed in July 2021]

The entire border zone – which extends for many kilometres into both Croatia and Bosnia – is thereby transformed into a space of erratic migrant circulation.

First we are going to Bojna, we are sleeping in Bojna, one night.. no, two nights we are staying. And then in jungle three days. Twenty-five kilometers. But in the day we can't walk, just in the night. / ... / Shayan is tired. And the small animals are coming and eating my child. It's too much for Shayan and Sara, and I say "We cannot anymore stay in jungle." We find one house and we are staying in this house, but it is not good. It is all finished [demolished] this house. We stay, and in the morning we are again going, going, going. And then the police come [and push back].

[Mother of Family 3, interviewed in May 2021]

The progressive debilitation of these families was not based on brutal restrictions of movement or use of force, but rather on a form of slow violence, perpetrated by exhausting, abandoning, cramping, suffocating, and disrupting movement – all tactics that contributed to their 'mobile containment'. Such 'measures' of containment result from prolonged exposure to nature, sleeping in the open, excessive walking, dehydration, untreated injuries, hiding, escape, separation from or loss of family members, movement from camp to camp, eviction, robbery, and physical and psychological harm (see also Schindel, 2019).

Almost two years. / ... / Now last year, the situation is crazy bad. Also, they don't know what they want to do. They close the border. The Bosnian say "we don't want migrant to stay here", so they close the camp and from one side they are also closing the border. What they want to do? Then the migrant can't leave."

[Senior member of Family 2, interviewed in July 2021]

There is no official record of these days of containment; no one decides on the asylum cases of these migrants: spatial confinement in such a border zone can last for days, months, or even years without anyone being responsible, held accountable, or even made fully aware of the migrants' predicament.

## 6. Conclusion

At the outset of this article, we observed that debates on questions of mobility justice repeatedly highlight how contemporary subjectivities are crucially forged by power relations of mobility and immobility. As we noted, these debates insist that "mobility and immobility are connected, relational and co-dependent, and should therefore be considered together [...] as dynamic constellations of multiple scales, simultaneous practices and relational meanings" (Sheller, 2018: 1). In this paper we have argued that this is also true in relation to the management of informal migration by authorities, who may employ an ambivalent interplay of forced mobility and immobility, when implementing particular border regimes along the Balkan Route.

As discussed in Section 2, previous research has shown how state authorities occasionally resort to a kind of 'strategic lawlessness' in response to the ongoing and disruptive mobility and presence of migrants. This scholarship suggests that these non-governing technologies should be understood as interventions through withdrawal. While these forms of 'border governance' grant migrants a certain degree of freedom of movement, they also force them to take complicated and indirect routes, causing them to become increasingly tired, injured and disillusioned. Their spaces of life and movement are repeatedly disrupted, leaving them without a clear legal or material foundation — a condition that Tazzioli (2020) refers to as 'spatial entrapment and legal destitution'.

In dialogue with this debate, we have argued that our findings demonstrate the particular challenges faced by families due to such erratic spatial entrapment. This is because migrants attempting to cross the border are exposed to mobile containment measures that generate extremely debilitating conditions. In particular, they are forced to navigate an arduous and difficult-to-understand border regime involving intermittent intervention and retreat by the authorities.

Perhaps the most original conceptual contribution of this article to debates in migration studies and political geography is its demonstration that the circular *geographies of mobile containment* here discussed are 'sustained' by the unstable interplay of 'centripetal' and 'centrifugal' forces: the latter drawing migrants towards urban areas and formal and informal camps and the former tending to 'disperse them'; the latter 'pulling' migrants towards the border and the former 'scattering' them away from the border – generating a cascade of escape, capture, release, and abandonment in various sequential patterns.

While previous work has examined specific stages of this circularity, namely 'escape' (Minca & Collins, 2021) and 'capture and release' (Augustova et al., 2023), this article has sought to illustrate how each stage plays a crucial role in the enforcement of mobile containment. In other words, the findings of the present research reveal how, across this border zone, migrant mobility becomes entangled with mechanisms of control *at the very point where it appears most subversive*, and the associated governance regime is consolidated at the very point where it appears to be 'loosest'.

One of the most oppressive features of the mobile containment documented here was its indefinite duration: migrants tried to find a way out, but success depended not only on their agency and perseverance, but also on luck, the mood of the Croatian police, natural elements, their state of health, and so on. The indefinite temporalities of mobile containment also distinguish it from other forms of containment (e.g., detention) and from other cases of 'being stranded *en-route*'. Migrants in this border zone have thus been both 'kept in containment' and 'kept on-

the-move' through the interventions of numerous actors with diverse institutional and non-institutional affiliations, whose actions are shaped by a shifting array of national and local laws and decrees. The three case studies discussed here demonstrate that none of these factors lessen the suffering endured by migrants, nor do they diminish their autonomy or resilience as they continued to employ 'Game tactics' – such as living illegally in hidden makeshift camps and using remote forest routes. Even these tactics, however, have ultimately been incorporated into a broader mode of migration containment that operates through hypermobility and exhaustion.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Lucija Klun Turk:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Claudio Minca:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Data curation, Conceptualization.

### Declaration of competing interest

There is no competing interest.

### Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Slovenian Research Agency (Narodna in kulturna identiteta slovenskega izseljenstva v kontekstu raziskovanja migracij, PS-0070, <https://cris.cobiss.net/ecris/si/sl/project/10416>) and the European Union (ERC, TheGAME - ERC-2021-ADG n.101054428 <https://site.unibo.it/thegame/en>). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them. We are grateful to the participants who told us about their itineraries and helped us conceive the distances covered during games. We would also like to thank Sebastian Cobarrubias for reading the earlier version of the manuscript and for his useful suggestions, and Matjaž Geršič for an astounding amount of patience and support in map-making. Also in this case, we are solely responsible for the content of the paper.

### Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

### References

Adey, P. (2017). *Mobility* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.

Adey, P. (2024). The new mobilities paradigm. In W. Gratzner, N. Grosch, U. Präger, & S. Scheibhofer (Eds.), *The routledge handbook of music and migration*. London: Routledge.

Altin, R., & Minca, C. (2017). Exopolis reloaded: Fragmented landscapes and no man's lands in a North-Eastern Italian border region. *Landscape Research*, 42(4), 385–399.

Aradau, C. (2016). Political grammars of mobility, security and subjectivity. *Mobilities*, 11(4), 564–574.

Aru, S. (2021). Abandonment, agency, control: Migrants' camps in Ventimiglia. *Antipode*, 53(6), 1619–1638.

Augustova, K. (2023). *Everyday violence at the EU's external borders*. London: Routledge.

Augustova, K., Farrand-Carrapico, H., & Obradovic-Wochnik, J. (2023). Push and back: The ripple effect of EU border externalisation from Croatia to Iran. *Environment and Planning A*, 41(5), 847–865.

Basok, T., Bélanger, D., Wiesner, M. L. R., & Candiz, G. (2016). *Rethinking transit migration*. London: Palgrave.

Benghellab, A., Davies, T., & Isakjee, A. (2025). Four seasons of border violence: The co-option of the seasons into the management of migration. *Geoforum*, 160, Article 104207.

Bez nec, B., & Kurnik, A. (2020). Old routes, new perspectives: A postcolonial reading of the Balkan route. *movements*, 5(1), 33–54.

Bez nec, B., Speer, M., & Stojić Mitrović, M. M. (2016). *Governing the Balkan route*. *Belgrad: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Southeast Europe*.

Breed, D. (2016). Abuses at Europe's borders. *Forced Migration Review*. <https://www.fmrreview.org/breen/>.

Brewer, S., Tejada, L., & Meyer, M. (2022). Struggling to survive: The situation of asylum seekers in Tapachula, Mexico. *WOLA, Advocacy for Human Rights in the America*. <https://www.wola.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/FINAL-Struggling-to-Survive-Asylum-Seekers-in-Tapachula.pdf>.

Brigden, N. K. (2018). *The migrant passage: clandestine journeys from Central America*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Carter-White, R., & Minca, C. (2025). *A spatial theory of the camp*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Casas-Cortes, M., & Cobarrubias, S. (2018). It is obvious from the map! disobeying the production of illegality beyond borderlines. *movements*, 4(1).

Casas-Cortes, M., Cobarrubias, S., Heller, C., & Pezzani, L. (2017). Clashing cartographies, migrating maps: The politics of mobility at the external borders of E.U. *ACME*, 16(1), 1–33.

Chambers, S. N., Boyce, G. A., & Jacobs, J. W. (2021). Constructing a desert labyrinth: The psychological and emotional geographies of deterrence strategy on the US/Mexico border. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 38, 1–9.

Chattopadhyay, S., & Tynes, J. A. (2022). Lives in waiting. *Geopolitics*, 27(4), 1231–1256.

Collyer, M. (2010). Stranded migrants and the fragmented journey. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 23(3), 279–293.

Cresswell, T. (2006). *On the move*. London: Routledge.

Cresswell, T. (2021). Valuing mobility in a post COVID-19 world. *Mobilities*, 16(1), 51–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2020.1863550>

Cresswell, T., & Merriman, P. (Eds.). (2013). *Geographies of mobilities*. London: Routledge.

Dalton, C., & Mason-Deese, L. (2012). Counter (Mapping) actions: Mapping as militant research. *ACME*, 11(3), 439–466.

Davies, T., Isakjee, A., & Obradovic-Wochnik, J. (2022). Epistemic borderwork: Violent pushbacks, refugees, and the politics of knowledge at the EU border. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 113(1), 169–188.

Davies, T., Isakjee, A., & Obradovic-Wochnik, J. (2024). The politics of injury: Debilitation and the right to maim at the EU border. *Geopolitics*, 1–29.

De León, J. (2015). *The land of open graves*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

European Parliamentary Research, Service.. Addressing pushbacks at the EU's external borders. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2025/772882/2/EPRS\\_BRI\(2025\)772882\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2025/772882/2/EPRS_BRI(2025)772882_EN.pdf).

Franck, A. K. (2022). Laughable borders: Making the case for the humorous in migration studies. *Migration Politics*, 1(4), 1–12.

Garrett, T. M., & Sementelli, A. J. (2022). COVID-19, asylum seekers, and migrants on the Mexico-US border: Creating states of exception. *Politics & Policy*, 50(4), 872–886.

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

Gentili, R., Minca, C., & Weima, Y. (2026). Camp Geographies in Una-Sana Canton, Bosnia and Herzegovina (2018–2022). In C. Minca, & Y. Weima (Eds.), *Thinking like a route: counter-geographies of informal migration in the Balkans*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.

Hess, S., & Kasperek, B. (2022). Historicizing the Balkan Route. *Governing Migration through Mobility*. In W. Walters, C. Heller, & L. Pezzani (Eds.), *Viapolitics. Borders, migration, and the power of locomotion* (pp. 183–207). Duke University Press.

Hofstaedter, G. (2019). Arrested refugee mobilities: Optics as bordering techniques in Malaysia. *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 34(3), 521–546.

Human Rights Watch. (2019). *Open letter to President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic*. [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/supporting\\_resources/hrw\\_letter\\_to\\_croatia\\_presidentpdf\\_0.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/supporting_resources/hrw_letter_to_croatia_presidentpdf_0.pdf).

Human Rights Watch. *Like we were just animals": Pushbacks of people from Croatia to Bosnia and Herzegovina*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/05/03/we-were-just-animals/pushbacks-people-seeking-protection-croatia-bosnia-and-herzegovina>.

Huysmans, J., Aradau, C., Scheel, S., & Tazzioli, M. (2021). Mobility/Movement. *Environment and Planning C*, 40(4), 781–875.

Jacobsen, C. M., Karlsen, M. A., & Khosravi, S. (Eds.). (2021). *Waiting and the temporalities of irregular migration*. London: Routledge.

Jordan, J., & Minca, C. (2023a). Micro-Politics of a makeshift refugee camp: The Grafosrem factory in Sid, Serbia. *Antipode*, 55(2), 480–505.

Jordan, J., & Minca, C. (2023b). Makeshift camp geographies and informal migration corridors. *Progress in Human Geography*, 47(2), 259–279.

Jordan, J., & Moser, S. (2020). Researching migrants in informal transit camps along the Balkan Route: Reflections on volunteer activism, access, and reciprocity. *Area*, 52(3), 566–574.

Korte, K. (2020). "Who is the animal in the zoo?" fencing in and fencing out at the Hungarian-Serbian border a qualitative case study. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 37(3), 1–22.

Korte, K. (2021). Filtering or blocking mobility? Inequalities, marginalization, and power relation at fortified border. *Historical Social Research*, 46(3), 49–77.

Lavery, S. (2024). Rebuilding The Fortress? Europe in a changing world economy. *Review of International Political Economy*, 31(1), 330–353.

Leshem, N. (2025). *Edges of care*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Minca, C. (2021). Makeshift camp methodologies along the Balkan Route. *Area*, 54(3), 365–373.

Minca, C., & Collins, J. (2021). The game: Or, 'the making of migration' along the Balkan route. *Political Geography*, 91, 1–11.

Minca, C., & Umek, D. (2020). The new refugee 'Balkan Route': Field notes from the Bosnian border. *Rivista Geografica Italiana*, 127, 5–34.

Minca, C., & Weima, Y. (2026). Route thinking? In C. Minca, & Y. Weima (Eds.), *Thinking like a route: counter-geographies of informal migration in the Balkans*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.

Nassar, J., & Stel, N. (2019). Lebanon's response to the Syrian refugee crisis: Institutional ambiguity as a governance strategy. *Political Geography*, 70, 44–54.

Pallister-Wilkins, P. (2018). Hotspots and the geographies of humanitarianism. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 38(6), 991–1008.

- Pezzani, L., & Heller, C. (2013). A disobedient gaze: Strategic interventions in the knowledge(s) of maritime borders. *Postcolonial Studies*, 16(3), 289–298.
- Picozza, F. (2017). Dubliners: Unthinking displacement, illegality, and refugeeness within Europe's geographies of asylum. In N. De Genova (Ed.), *The borders of 'Europe'*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Puar, J. K. (2017). *The right to maim*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Schapendonk, J., van Liempt, I., Schwarz, I., & Steel, G. (2018). Re-routing migration geographies: Migrants, trajectories and mobility regimes. *Geoforum*, 116, 211–216.
- Schindel, E. (2019). Death by 'nature': The European border regime and the spatial production of slow violence. *Environment and Planning C*, 40(2), 428–446.
- Schwenken, H. (2014). From sangatte to 'the jungle': Europe's contested borderlands. In H. Schwenken, & S. Ruß-Sattar (Eds.), *New border and citizenship politics*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 171–186.
- Sheller, M. (2018). *Mobility justice*. London: Verso.
- Sheller, M., & Urry, J. (2006). The new mobilities paradigm. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 38(2), 207–226.
- Sheller, M., & Urry, J. (2016). Mobilizing the new mobilities paradigm. *Applied Mobilities*, 1(1), 10–25.
- Shum, T. C. T. (2022). Stuck in transit: Asylum-seeking habitus and onward migration aspirations of Sri Lankan Tamil asylum-seekers in Bangkok. *Migration and Development*, 11(3), 974–993.
- Stojić Mitrović, M., & Vilenica, A. (2019). Enforcing and disrupting circular movement in an EU Borderscape: Housingscaping in Serbia. *Citizenship Studies*, 23(6), 540–558.
- Tazzioli, M. (2019). Governing migrant mobility through mobility. Containment and dispersal at the internal frontiers of Europe. *Environment and Planning C*, 38(1), 3–19.
- Tazzioli, M. (2020). *The making of migration*. London: SAGE.
- Tazzioli, M. (2021). Choking without killing: Opacity and the grey area of migration governmentality. *Political Geography*, 89.
- Tazzioli, M., & Garelli, G. (2018). Containment beyond detention: The hotspot system and disrupted migration movements across Europe. *Environment and Planning D*, 36(6), 1009–1027.
- Tazzioli, M., & Garelli, G. (2019). Counter-mapping refugees and asylum borders. In K. Mitchell, R. Jones, & J. L. Fluri (Eds.), *Handbook of critical geographies of migration*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Van Houtum, H., & Bueno Lacy, R. (2019). The migration map trap. On the invasion arrows in the cartography of migration. *Mobilities*, 15(2), 196–219.
- Vogt, W. (2018). *Lives in transit: Violence and intimacy on the migrant journey*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Zocchi, B. (2023). The game: Ritualized exhaustion and subversion on the Western Balkan route. *Journal of Borderland Studies*, 39(5), 875–895.