

Thinking Like a Route

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Thinking Like a Route

Counter-geographies of Informal Migration in
the Balkans

Edited by

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List of abbreviations

AC	Asylum Centre
ACAPS	Assessment Capacities Project
ACSG	Asylum Capacity Support Group
AFP	Agence France-Presse
AIDA	Asylum Information Database
ANSA	Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata (Associated National Press)
BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
BVMN	Border Violence Monitoring Network
CEAS	Common European Asylum System
CMC	Crisis Management Centre
COI	Country of Origin Information
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
DTM	Displacement Tracking Matrix
EASO	European Asylum Support Office
EMN	European Migration Network
ERC	European Research Council
ETC	Emergency Tent Camp
EU	European Union
EUAA	European Union Agency for Asylum
FYRoM	Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia
GDP	Global Detention Project
HCIT	Humanitarian Centre for Integration and Tolerance
ICJ	International Court of Justice
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
INGO	International Non-governmental Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IPA	Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance
IRC	International Rescue Committee
MSF	Médecins sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders)
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
OBC	Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa

RoA	Republic of Albania
RRC	Refugee Reception Centre
RTAC	Registration and Temporary Accommodation Centre
SAA	Stabilisation and Association Agreement
SFA	Service for Foreigners' Affairs
SOP	Standard Operating Procedures
TRC	Temporary Reception Centre
UN	United Nations
UNCT	United Nations Country Team
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution

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Introduction to *Thinking Like a Route*

Yolanda Weima and Claudio Minca

Thinking like a Route represents a preliminary attempt to reflect methodologically on the possibility of studying an informal migratory route – such as the so-called Balkan Route – as a whole. Global media attention to ‘the Balkan Route’ has somewhat faded since the emergence of a semi-formal overland migration corridor in the spring of 2015, which gained international visibility as it connected Greece to Western Europe via FYR Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, Croatia, and Slovenia. Although this semi-formal ‘humanitarian corridor’ was officially closed in the spring of 2016, a range of new, clandestine trajectories soon emerged. Today, the Balkan Route remains the largest overland informal migration route in Europe. It loosely encompasses a variety of diverse and shifting passageways that link Turkey and Greece to several Western European countries, passing through a number of ‘Balkan’ states in ever-changing configurations. The latter include, in addition to those already mentioned, Albania, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo,¹ and Montenegro – along with countless deviations beyond the dominant trajectories.

As we shall see in the following pages, the very concept of a route has been contested within the critical literature on migration, as it has been adopted by various organizations and authorities to describe, investigate, and contain the transnational informal mobility of migrants. However, as we will discuss, the concept of the route is also employed by other key actors implicated in the making of this migratory corridor. The idea for this volume – which brings together some of the initial steps in the exploration of the Balkan Route by members of the team involved in the ERC TheGAME project – sprang from our engagement with this fundamental issue. Indeed, several chapters in this collection represent a continuation of conversations that began during

¹ This designation is in line with United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

the project's first workshop, organized by the editors and held in Trieste in December 2023, and that evolved within the team in the months that followed.

The title of this book is clearly inspired by the titles of other, far more ambitious works – such as James C. Scott's *Seeing Like a State* (1999) and Mahmoud Keshavarz and Shahram Khosravi's *Seeing Like a Smuggler* (2022). This was a deliberately provocative indirect citation, intended to stimulate further reflection on the possibility of conceptualizing a route *as such*, in its multiple dimensions. At the same time, it is also important to note that *Thinking Like a Route* is the second volume in the 'Counter-geographies of the Refugee Balkan Route' book series – which was conceived as a space to showcase some of the most significant reflections and outcomes of TheGAME project. The first volume in the series, *A Spatial Theory of the Camp* (Carter-White & Minca, 2025), theorizes the spatial logics and practices that connect diverse historical and contemporary camps vis-à-vis the modern nation-state, including the multiplicity of camps established along the Balkan Route. This edited volume delves more deeply into 'the Route' itself. It represents a first, partial, and necessarily incomplete attempt to map and counter-map key aspects of this complex space carved out by migrants' informal mobilities. To this end, we approach the Balkan Route from two perspectives – each corresponding to a distinct analytical scale – through which we attempt to understand this specific geographical formation that cuts across the Balkans and has drawn sustained attention from numerous European governments and various European Union (EU) institutions. On the one hand, we consider the perspectives of state and transnational organizations, whose imaginaries of the Route shape how they seek to know, contain, and manage informal migration in the region. This hegemonic form of 'route thinking' has informed border politics and policies – particularly those centred on securitization and the externalization of borders – for over a decade. On the other hand, we engage with the embodied 'route thinking' of people-on-the-move, who navigate the region in pursuit of their desired destinations, often in the face of immense challenges generated by the irregularization of their mobilities. These challenges include both structural violence and forms of direct border violence.

These two 'scales' of 'route thinking' inform the structure of this work. Chapter 1 begins by reviewing the existing literature on the Balkan Route. At its core, the chapter questions the very concept of a 'route' and its appropriateness as an analytical lens in critical migration research. We outline critical perspectives on 'route thinking' in order to ask: given that it operates as a powerful geographical imaginary – shaping how states and EU institutions attempt to manage migration – is it an appropriate framework for our research? Hegemonic 'route thinking' tends to homogenize, simplify, and criminalize different mobilities. It is often used to justify border policies and practices that intensify both structural and direct violence against people-on-the-move. The

chapter then shifts from a discussion of this dominant perspective to an exploration of what it might mean to counter-map the Route in light of such critiques. This section introduces our theorization of the 'Game': an ambivalent term used by migrants and others to describe the challenge of attempting to cross borders while facing pushbacks and other obstacles and forms of violence. We interpret the Game as a form of 'route thinking' in its own right – though one grounded in embodied geographical imaginings of how to navigate the Route rather than in abstract imaginaries. Accordingly, this chapter proposes 'thinking like a route' as a conceptual entry point for counter-mapping informal mobilities – mobilities shaped by the entwined dynamics of 'route thinking' across different scales. It also reflects on the methodological implications of such an approach, both for the book and for the broader aims of the project.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Following this foundational chapter, the two main parts of this book, each comprising three chapters, reflect the two analytical perspectives outlined above. The chapters in Part I, entitled 'Mappings,' address the formal infrastructure of migration management across the Route and how this infrastructure has been shaped by – and in turn shapes – the Route. Specifically, the chapters discuss the designation of camps (Chapter 2), the shaping of asylum systems (Chapter 3), and the construction of border walls (Chapter 4). The establishment of this infrastructure reflects 'route thinking' by authorities, including at the state and supra-state scales, and is shaped by the geopolitics of migration management. Nevertheless, it is not homogeneously or consistently implemented. Rather, it takes different forms at different times in the different countries along the Route. Tracing these key elements of the Route's formal infrastructure, as conceived from a state perspective, may reveal what remains invisible or obscured by the official state gaze and by many international organizations engaged in migration management and humanitarian aid.

In Chapter 2, Yolanda Weima traces the shifting archipelago of state-run camps across the region from 2015 to the present. She adopts a broad definition of camps, encompassing asylum and detention infrastructure, as well as transit camps, temporary reception centres, and other forms of open and restricted-access migrant accommodation. Although the literature on camps is very uneven across the Route, she nevertheless identifies two key patterns in this key infrastructure of state and humanitarian migration management. First, she notes the initial use of EU-funded asylum and detention infrastructure, although this infrastructure was eventually overwhelmed in each country (sometimes within days of increased arrivals, and in other cases more slowly due to changes in micro-routes). Second, she notes a shift to an expressly created and explicitly transit/temporary migration camp infrastructure across the

Route, bound up in many places with other trends such as moving migrant accommodation away from urban areas, formalizing shelter arrangements, and privileging the use of shipping containers as camp infrastructure. Drawing from the work of Kreichauf (2017), Weima describes these trends as the 'campization' of the Balkan Route, as states seek to use the opening, closure, and management of camps, to both respond to and seek to shape the ways that refugee-migrants navigate mobilities across the region (on this, see also Carter-White & Minca, 2025).

In Chapter 3, Lorenzo Vianelli explores how the conditions tied to EU accession are influencing the asylum systems of countries along the Balkan Route. He shows how these processes contribute to the externalization of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and shape broader migration management across the region. Drawing on a range of sources – including policy documents, legal frameworks, and reports from both institutions and NGOs – Vianelli identifies key trends in the evolving configuration of this migration corridor. A central theme in the chapter is the EU leverage over non-EU countries through its Enlargement Policy. On the one hand, the EU exerts direct influence via formal pre-accession requirements; on the other, it operates more subtly through mechanisms such as training programs and operational support. Vianelli argues that while 'the declared objective of the externalisation of the CEAS is to establish functioning asylum systems in the Balkans; on the other hand, this outcome might reflect a broader concern on the part of EU actors to create a buffer zone of safe third countries along one of the main migratory routes towards the EU'. Such a buffer zone could later be used to justify 'safe' returns and to contain migration flows. In this light, the push for CEAS harmonization may epitomize institutional 'route thinking' at the same time as it promotes the right to asylum in the region.

In Chapter 4, Alexandra Rijke traces the proliferation (and in some cases the decay) of border walls and fences across the Balkan Route over the past ten years. She situates this 'walling' within a broader global context where the construction of border walls has been accelerating. First engaging with the critical literature on border walls, she then homes in on the uneven and incomplete literature on the walls marking sections of the borders between Hungary and Serbia, Serbia and North Macedonia, North Macedonia and Greece, Greece and Turkey, and Turkey and Bulgaria, as well as the already 'fallen' walls between Hungary and Croatia and Slovenia and Croatia. Based on this 'mapping', she raises three key questions to guide further research. First, Rijke asks how walls can be studied as part of migration routes. Second, she highlights the importance of examining the impact of walls that both 'wall-in' and 'wall-out' – shaping the experiences of local residents and irregularized migrants alike. Finally, she reflects on the methodological challenges of researching walls, which, while serving as spectacular symbols of state power,

are correspondingly ‘difficult, if not impossible, to study “on the ground”’ due to restricted access and the scarcity of reliable secondary sources.

Part II entitled ‘Regional Dispatches’ is based on empirical research conducted across the Balkan Route, tracing the relationship between key sites of migration management and counter-mobilities. The chapters approach this topic at three different scales: those of a country (Serbia – Chapter 5), a canton (Una-Sana Canton, Bosnia and Herzegovina – Chapter 6), and a city (Trieste, Italy – Chapter 7). In Chapter 5, Dragan Umek and Claudio Minca draw on their twenty-plus field trips over the past decade to examine changes in Serbia’s ‘geopolitics of migration’ since the so-called ‘long summer of migration’. They identify three key phases: first, the period of the humanitarian corridor (2015–2016); second, the slowing of mobilities and Serbia’s positioning as a ‘buffer zone’ (2016–2020); and third, a renewed ‘buffer zone’ phase centred on the emergence of the ‘Sombor Hub’ – a refugee hub in the northern city of Sombor, which has become a key site in the organization of informal border crossings in the region (2020–2023). The authors conclude by reflecting on the significant shifts in migration management in Serbia since the autumn of 2023 and considering their broader implications. Over the past decade, Umek and Minca argue, each phase of Serbia’s response has been shaped by the complex geopolitical dynamics of the Route, with Serbia playing a central role in the management of informal migration towards Western Europe. State policies and practices have been marked by a strategically ambivalent stance – on the one hand, tacitly facilitating the informal mobility of migrants; on the other, often actively working to contain and delay their onward movement. These shifting geopolitical imperatives have in turn shaped both state and humanitarian interventions, most notably in the formation and governance of an archipelago of camps across the country.

In Chapter 6, Roberta Gentili, Claudio Minca, and Yolanda Weima again draw attention to camp geographies as a key analytical entry point for analysing the Balkan Route – this time focusing on the shifting camp geographies of the Una-Sana Canton in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 2018, this canton experienced a significant surge in the arrival of migrants seeking to cross the border from Bosnia into Croatia. The region has since witnessed the rapid establishment and subsequent closure of a series of institutional camps and informal migrant settlements, with key changes occurring during the early months of the Covid-19 public health emergency. This chapter details how the opening of new formal camps in the canton over a period of several years has facilitated the erasure of previously widespread makeshift camps and squats in the area. It has also entailed the increased securitization of migrant accommodation, as well as the distancing of people-on-the-move from urban areas and their consequent invisibilization. The authors ultimately argue that camp closures

have changed the composition of migration in Una-Sana Canton, significantly affecting people-on-the-move and altering the dynamics of the 'Game'.

In Chapter 7, Claudio Minca and Dragan Umek tease out the intertwining of formal and informal migrant spatialities in Trieste, Italy. Often seen as a terminus of one of the key articulations of the Balkan Route – the end of 'the Game' – Trieste represents both a symbolic and actual entry point into Italy and a gateway to Western Europe more broadly (though many migrants continue their journeys beyond the city). Yet for numerous arrivals, the precarious living conditions endured along the Route persist in Trieste. In the absence of formal accommodation, migrants are often left to survive in dire, informal, and makeshift living quarters. While they can access certain forms of humanitarian support, their lives frequently remain suspended in a kind of limbo as they await the outcomes of administrative procedures and the 'opening' of spaces within the formal hospitality system. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how Trieste's migrant geographies in many ways extend the interplay of formal and informal spatialities that underpins the 'making of migration' across the Balkan Route.

The three chapters in Part II of the book offer an initial, partial attempt at exploring what it might mean to counter-map the Route. While they begin to draw insights from the 'route thinking' of people-on-the-move, this is still done in a limited way, with significant emphasis placed on the actions and geopolitics of state and humanitarian actors operating at different scales. As noted above, this volume represents a first preliminary effort to reflect methodologically on the possibility of studying an informal migratory route – such as the Balkan Route – in its entirety. Inevitably, this comes with limitations, which we hope to address in the next stages of the ERC project and in future publications. For example, future research could delve more deeply into the often ambivalent but meaningful connections between sites along this migration corridor, aiming to analytically link city 'refugee hubs' and border regions along the Route to the camp archipelagos that span across state borders. At the same time, more could be said about how the networks of smugglers that facilitate migrant mobility along the Route are continuously generating new counter-geographies in response to both shifting border regimes in the countries traversed and the EU's evolving strategies of border externalization.

The ERC project will also investigate other areas in the Balkans where the Route has reshaped local economies, with a particular focus on countries such as North Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Montenegro – contexts in which very little research has been conducted on the impact of this large-scale movement of people across their territories. Greece, despite being a key entry point to the Balkan Route and a focus of forthcoming project research, is also underrepresented in this volume. This omission is largely due to the pace of the project and the extensive fieldwork still required in this region before any substantial

analysis of its complex migrant geographies can be published. Finally, deeper critical engagement with the ‘grand narratives’ of the Route – those produced and promoted by the various actors operating within this space – would have further enriched our analysis of the different manifestations of ‘route thinking’ and their influence on how the Route is not only imagined but also managed and continually reshaped. We sincerely hope that readers will overlook these limitations and still find value in the set of analyses presented in the volume. Most of these limitations, along with further lines of inquiry, will be addressed in subsequent volumes of this series. In relation to our future writing plans – and also to some of the ethical considerations that have accompanied the project, and this volume, from the outset – we would like to conclude this Introduction by reflecting on certain terminological choices we have made, with a view to addressing sensitive concepts and issues related to the study of vulnerable subjects, such as those who have engaged, and continue to engage, with this informal migration corridor.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Debates around terminology in refugee and migration studies have been ongoing for decades, grounded in the shared recognition that categories *matter*. Many of the terms used to describe people who cross borders – such as those traveling along the Balkan Route – ‘carry connotations of colonization and racialization’ (Bauder, 2013: 5) and can be entangled with forms of ‘epistemological violence’. These terminological choices can have real-world implications for state, societal, and humanitarian responses to human mobilities (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018; Ehrkamp, 2017; Hyndman & Giles, 2017; Hyndman & Reynolds, 2020). Indeed, states often construct legal frameworks that categorize certain mobilities as illegal (Bauder, 2013), while humanitarian categories similarly determine access to rights and aid for some but not others (Hyndman, 2000; Long, 2013). Acritical use of these state and humanitarian categories can therefore inherently constrain the scope of researchers in the field, together with the breadth of their questions and analyses (Bakewell, 2008). In the context of the Balkan Route, critical discussions around terminology – particularly the debate over the use of ‘refugees’ versus ‘migrants’ – have not been confined to academic literature but have featured prominently in media discourse, especially during 2015 (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018; Rydzewski, 2023).

Precisely because ‘migrant’ is such a broad term, it can encompass a wide range of legal statuses and experiences – from privileged investor-class migrants to the most precarious border-crossers. Broadly speaking, most refugees are also migrants in the basic sense that they have moved from one place to another (Long, 2013; Rydzewski, 2023). Yet in everyday usage, the

term has often come to be equated with people moving for economic reasons and thus seen as ineligible for protection under international refugee law. In her review of migration geographies, Ehrkamp argues that the term ‘migrant’ ‘reduces people to labor and does not fully capture the complex webs of reasons and decisions why people migrate’ (2017: 815). As more states seek to evade humanitarian responsibilities and access to asylum becomes increasingly restricted, the insistence on using the term ‘refugees’ – regardless of legal status – can serve as a political statement emphasizing the necessity of offering refuge. However, the category of ‘refugee’ is complex: it is broad in that it can homogenize diverse experiences and subjectivities, yet also limited in its legal application, having been conceptualized from its inception in ways that are Eurocentric and exclusionary (Abuya et al., 2021; Hyndman, 2000; Malkki, 1995; Mayblin, 2014).

Some scholars, seeking to avoid this refugee/migrant binary, have proposed or chosen alternative terminology.² Terminology such as ‘refugees and other migrants’ (Crawley & Jones, 2021: 3226), ‘refugee-migrants’ (Hyndman & Reynolds, 2020), or ‘humanitarian migrants’ (Van Houte et al., 2023) seek to ‘blur’ the boundaries between categories while drawing attention to the associated politics (Hyndman & Reynolds, 2020). Not only do people leave their homes for a wide variety of reasons that do not necessarily fit easily with definitions in international law, but how such categories are applied also varies from country to country and even within countries. The use of a single category that depends on identifying a single ‘rationale for migration’ may ‘limit understandings of complex migration journeys’ (Hyndman & Reynolds, 2020: 72; Schwarz, 2020).

In the context of the Balkan Route specifically, a number of scholars propose terms such as ‘irregularized humanitarian migrants’ (Van Houte et al., 2023) or ‘irregularized migrants’ (Bendixsen, 2017; Hameršak, 2022; Jacobsen & Karlsen, 2020) to draw attention to the role of socio-political processes in producing laws and practices that limit access to legal options for many people seeking to cross borders (Bauder, 2013). The term ‘people-on-the-move’ has also become common. While it is widely used by activist and solidarity groups (see, for instance, Collective Aid, 2023; No Name Kitchen, 2024), it has also been adopted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2025) and other UN agencies, and even features in reports by business consulting

² Humanitarian agencies and states have also multiplied the terms and categorizations they use – most often with the effect of limiting access to secure, long-term status (Bakewell, 2021) – but also, at times to broaden the scope of their response, or to justify their role in a given context in relation to their mandate, as in the UNHCR’s use of the term ‘persons in need of international protection’ at reception centres in Serbia (Rydzewski, 2023: 9).

firms such as the McKinsey Global Institute (2016). Critiques of this term include that it may obscure the fact that not everyone is aiming to or able to move at every point along their journey (Crawley & Jones, 2021).

Yet, for all these debates, Rydzewski argues that, particularly after the closure of the humanitarian corridor across the Balkans, ‘the emphasis on terminology did little to enforce the duty to protect people fleeing war, political terror, hunger or because of a desire to change the environment in which they live. In fact, their situation worsened month by month’ (2023: 8). Furthermore, from a discursive perspective, no category can capture ‘the full human experience’ (Bakewell, 2021: 64) or even the full migration experience. A degree of ‘flattening’ is perhaps analytically necessary, even when unintended (Bakewell, 2021), given that all ‘people are more than their migration status’ (Hyndman & Reynolds, 2020: 72).

Many of the chapters in this volume use the ‘migrant’ category, or the term ‘people-on-the-move’, precisely because they are broad. These terms can encompass the way that a single person’s status may vary along the Route and over time. They allow us to discuss people who have left homes in vastly different contexts and for diverse reasons (El-Shaarawi & Razsa, 2019), without needing to formulate any judgement regarding their reasons for travelling the Route. Especially because national profiling has been central to securitizing the Balkan Route, justifying border closures and violence, we are reluctant to refer to state categories that may see some people as coming from ‘refugee-producing countries’ or ‘safe countries’. Furthermore, ‘irregularity’ is itself a continuum in many settings along the Route, as people move in and out of a variety of temporary statuses at different points in their journeys (Bendixsen, 2023; Hyndman & Reynolds, 2020; Jacobsen & Karlsen, 2020: 1). Arguably, the use of the term refugee, or asylum seeker, or any other term, when not tied to state definitions, could be used with equally broad understandings. Yet, at times, differentiating between legal statuses *is* analytically relevant and important to understanding how people navigate the Route. Accordingly, the authors in this volume use different terminologies – sometimes interchangeably and broadly, sometimes with purposeful reference to specific legal regimes – but always with the understanding that these categories are contested, slippery, and imperfect, with connotations changing across contexts and over time.

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1. Route thinking?

Claudio Minca and Yolanda Weima

The hardest thing was when I left Turkey. Making the decision to immigrate to the unknown. You heard stories of people who did it and so on, but I didn't even have that in my head. It's difficult to go out, to walk in the woods, etc. I thought the only danger would be the police and the military. Instead, there are so many dangers. Even animals. In Croatia, there are people who have been attacked by bears and wild boars. The hardest thing is also when you are struggling, walking, facing dangers, the cold, paying, finding a way to get the money, and so on. And then they catch you and send you back. [...] After all that, they send us back.

This happened to me. [...] Many people didn't make it, they went back. For me, the reason that pushed me to continue was the circumstances in which I was in [my home country]. [...] I look for work, I bring money, I try again.
(Woman from North Africa, interviewed in Sarajevo, October 2024)

I got my food from the little shops along the Route, these shops are usually a bit improvised; we bought food from these little shops. Along the Route I slept in the open in the woods and sometimes we would go to the abandoned buildings that you find along the roads; they are practically the ruins of the buildings where I slept. [...] I didn't know this before I left, but as we travelled the Route we talked to people and as I went along, I discovered the complexity of the journey. Sometimes people talked about the places where so many migrants had died because of the many difficulties there. In fact, in Bosnia I saw people who had died. I don't know how they lost their lives.

I don't think I would ever do it again. At first you don't realise the difficulties along the Route, but once you start you realise the complexities you have to face. Now that I know, I would never do it again.
(Man from Afghanistan, 26, interviewed in Trieste, February 2024)

The so-called 'Balkan Route' is the most significant informal land migration corridor in Europe. Although it has mainly attracted widespread news coverage since the summer of 2015 – when hundreds of thousands of people fleeing war zones used it to reach safety – it had existed long before that moment, serving as a vital passageway for refugees of diverse origins across various historical periods (Hess & Kasparek, 2021). Even in the years immediately

preceding what Kasperek and Speer (2015) termed ‘the long summer of migration’ during which a semi-formal humanitarian corridor was kept open for several months, many locations along the Route had already witnessed the sustained presence of refugees from Kosovo,¹ other parts of the Balkans, the Middle East, and Asia more broadly (King & Oruc, 2019). And it remains significant: according to recent estimates by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), over 600,000 people-on-the-move have crossed the so-called Western Balkans in the last five years (IOM, 2025).

Mapping a tentative geography of this corridor reveals a complex network of transit hubs, micro-routes, and border crossing points used informally by people-on-the-move. This network primarily – though not exclusively – links Turkey and Greece with a number of countries in Western Europe. The Route passes through, in shifting configurations, countries such as Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as Albania, Montenegro, and Kosovo, before continuing towards Hungary, Austria, and Germany. Alternatively, other trajectories extend through Croatia, Slovenia, and into Italy. Naturally, endless deviations and variations exist beyond the most prominent pathways.

As we were writing this chapter, Italian newspapers reported a meeting between the ‘interior ministries of Italy, Slovenia, and Croatia’ to ‘discuss migration management and internal security’:

The meeting [...] is part of a framework established some years ago, which provides for the exchange of information on the situation along the Western Balkan migration Route and the main security challenges faced by [these governments]. On the sidelines of the event, the directors-general of the police forces of the three countries are expected to sign a memorandum of understanding outlining the terms for implementing joint trilateral patrols along Croatia’s external border. (*Il Piccolo*, 17 January 2025, Authors’ translation)

This quote illustrates how firmly embedded the presence of the Balkan Route has become over the past decade not only in the practices of migrants and those who assist them along their clandestine journeys, but also in the geopolitical imagination of the countries directly involved. This consolidation has had far-reaching consequences for the governance of both territorial and digital borders, as well as for asylum and migration reception policies.

Stemming from the research conducted in the early stages of the European Research Council (ERC) Project: TheGAME, this book represents an initial, and partial, collective attempt to reflect on the unstable and ever-changing

¹ This designation is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

geographies of an informal migration route such as the Balkan Route. This preliminary reflection raises a fundamental question: to what extent is it appropriate to group and describe this multiplicity of diverse, clandestine migratory trajectories as a 'route'? Building on this, what are the conceptual implications of adopting this term – one that has come under intense scrutiny in recent years? More broadly, is this merely a terminological issue, or does the spatial metaphor of the 'route' still offer analytical value? Or conversely, has such critical scrutiny rendered the term inadequate for capturing the complexity of the transnational geographies that define the clandestine mobilities through this region in the heart of Europe?

As the following pages will clarify, the main critique levelled against the term itself – particularly its association with a 'route thinking' approach – centres on its adoption as a spatial perspective by international and national institutions seeking to analyse, represent, and ultimately control or prevent the mobility of informal subjects to and across European space. This criticism has notably been advanced by scholars such as Casas-Cortes and Cobarrubias (2018, 2019, 2021), Casas-Cortes et al. (2017), Kasperek (2016), Heller and Pezzani (2016), and Tazzioli (2015, 2020). We will engage with this important critique and its implications throughout the remainder of the chapter and, more indirectly, across the volume as a whole.

Indeed, this book stems from the urge to explore how the so-called Balkan Route has been conceived as a 'route' across various scales and by the diverse actors involved in its 'making'. This chapter, in particular, examines the workings of irregularized migration through the region by engaging both with critical perspectives and with the complex narratives and practices that define the informal migrant mobilities traversing this part of Europe. The Balkan Route is obviously not a linear trajectory through a series of territories, as many 'top-down' maps might lead one to believe (Van Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020; 2023) – although recent reports by international organizations have arguably become more nuanced in capturing these diverse experiences. As we have highlighted in other recent works (Carter-White & Minca, 2025; Minca & Collins, 2021), what we are analysing here is a complex and ever-changing multiplicity of spatial articulations, circuits, detours, new and old passage-ways, policing practices and barriers, formal and informal camps, shelters and safe houses, as well as varying reception and asylum systems. These elements are all, in different ways, bound up with the policies and practices of the multiple border regimes that shape the Schengen space, its peripheries, and the non-European Union (EU) countries implicated in the governance of migration in and through the 'Western Balkans'.

At the same time, the migrants we interviewed during the first two years of the project largely described – and *de facto* planned – their journeys *as routes*, a perspective similarly shared by humanitarian workers and smugglers. This

raises a key question at the heart of the project and, to some extent, of this volume: while the production of a comprehensive cartography of the Route remains unthinkable and, arguably, unethical, we contend that a critical geographical perspective on the territories and the people who move through them should be conceptually problematized as an exercise in counter-mapping. Accordingly, the present chapter is organized into three main sections. In the first, we briefly examine how the academic literature has represented and analysed this complex migration corridor, outlining how the book seeks to contribute to those discussions. The second section engages with the critical debate surrounding what has been termed ‘route thinking’, situating the volume within that conversation and, more specifically, in relation to our ongoing work on the Balkan Route. The third section focuses on counter-mapping the Route. More specifically, we outline our theorization of ‘the Game’ as a form of ‘route thinking’ and counter-geography made material by the desire and determination of people-on-the-move to complete their journeys, and examine the interplay of different scales and actors involved in ‘making the route’. In so doing, we draw on examples of ethnographic research on clandestine migration in Central America to begin reflecting on how people-on-the-move confront the violence generated by hegemonic ‘route thinking’ aimed at curbing migration, while nonetheless persisting in re-creating routes via a diversity of spaces and practices. Beyond providing cross-regional comparisons, these ethnographies are concrete examples that confront the ethical, practical, and theoretical challenges of researching dynamic, criminalized, transnational mobilities. Accordingly, we then reflect on the specific context of our research in TheGAME ERC project, and the methodological choices that have informed the structure of the book – and, to some extent, of the broader project. We thus return to the main conceptual underpinnings that shaped both this chapter and the volume as a whole, and consider how they may represent a first, partial, yet nonetheless significant attempt at counter-mapping the Balkan Route and at problematizing the language through which it is described, managed, and continually reproduced.

READING THE BALKAN ROUTE

The academic literature on the Balkan Route, while certainly predating the so-called ‘long summer of migration’, has become particularly vibrant since the opening of the humanitarian corridor and in the immediate aftermath of its closure (see, for example, Bužinkić & Hameršak, 2018; Kilibarda, 2016; Kogovšek Šalamon & Bajt, 2016; Rydzewski, 2023; Trakilović, 2019; for a recent critical review of this body of work see, among others, Carter-White & Minca, 2025). That period – roughly a decade ago at the time of writing – has been retrospectively defined by Rydzewski (2023) as a ‘liminal period’ leading

to the re-bordering of the region and the intensification of migration securitization along the Route.

Subsequently, a substantial portion of the critical literature² has focused on analysing the impact of EU border externalization in the region, particularly in relation to the securitization of the Route (Beznec & Kurnik, 2020; Bobić & Šantić, 2020; Carter-White & Minca, 2025; Obradovic-Wochnik & Bird, 2020; Rydzewski, 2023; Zorko, 2018). Scholars have highlighted the role of intersecting racism and anti-Muslim xenophobia in shaping many related policies (Bird et al., 2021; Helms, 2024; Rexhepi, 2022; Trakilović, 2019), as well as the production of other categories of difference and ‘deservingness’ – such as the national ‘filtering’ of individuals travelling the Route by characterizing some as ‘genuine refugees’ and others as ‘unwanted migrants’ (Rydzewski, 2023). Beznec and Kurnik (2020: 47) have described this bordering dynamic as a form of ‘hierarchical porosity’.

Many authors have emphasized the challenges of defining a route that is continually shifting and branching, with ‘multidirectional and often capillary migration routes’ (Stojić-Mitrović, 2022a: para. 1; Stojić-Mitrović & Vilenica, 2019). As observed by El Shaarawi and Razsa (2019: 93): ‘The Balkan Route by virtue of the complexity and volatility of patterns of mobility and immobility as well as the diversity of experiences and itineraries of people who have travelled it, resists simple temporal and spatial categorization’. The Route, in this sense, has remained dynamic over time – constantly reconfigured in response to changes in policies, practices, and bordering infrastructures. It converges with other routes at its multiple ‘entry’ and ‘ending’ nodes, and traverses highly distinct contexts (Ibid.). According to Stojić-Mitrović (2022b), it has therefore become increasingly difficult to speak of *the* Balkan Route. Other scholars have retained the ‘route’ terminology but conceptualize the Balkan Route as an assemblage or a set of assemblages (Beznec & Kurnik, 2020; El Shaarawi & Razsa, 2019).

In addition to scholarship challenging the notion of ‘route’, a distinct body of work questions the very construct of ‘the Balkans’ in general, and the ‘Western Balkans’ in particular (Kolstø, 2016; Lika, 2021, 2024; Todorova, 2009). The construal of ‘the (Western) Balkans’ as a discrete region overlaps and intertwines with the scalar construction of the Route itself and with the logic of ‘route thinking’, which we elaborate on in the following section. Numerous scholars have noted how the complex construct of the Balkans has sometimes been included in, and sometimes excluded from, the idea of Europeanness. The

² Conversely, and not reviewed here, there exists a body of literature that examines the Balkan Route from a migration management perspective, often emphasizing concerns with smuggling and criminality.

region has often been framed as a proximate-Other, associated with criminality, violence, and what has been termed ‘outlaw otherness’. These representations are closely tied to the EU’s externalized migration management strategies and violent securitization policies (see also Augustova, 2024; Augustova et al., 2023; Bird et al., 2021; Hromadžić, 2025; Rixhepi, 2022; Trakilović, 2019). The so-called ‘Western Balkans’ region, and particularly Bosnia and Serbia, has variously been conceived of as: ‘an antechamber, a kind of back yard of the zoned European Union used to corral unwanted people-on-the-move’ (Stojić-Mitrović, 2022b: para. 6); a ‘buffer zone’ (Carter-White & Minca, 2025; Minca & Collins, 2021: 7), and a ‘European borderland’ (Bez nec & Kurnik, 2020: 47).

Accordingly, migrants often find themselves trapped in a ‘labyrinthine border experience’ shaped by a ‘labyrinthian border architecture’ that emerges from the ‘interruptive effects of borders and mobility’ along the Route (Bendixsen, 2023: 196). People-on-the-move may oscillate between periods of immobility and mobility, or even simultaneously experience both ‘stuckness’ and ‘hypermobility’ within the borders of a single state (Martini, 2024; Rydzewski, 2023). Stojić-Mitrović (2022a: para. 1) has proposed the notion of ‘Balkan Circuit’, given that the trajectories determined by ‘pushbacks, pullbacks, [and] readmissions’ are not unidirectional for most people-on-the-move. Rather, their movements are ‘non-linear, fragmented, often circular’ (Ibid.). This circuit also includes the mobilities of various other actors, including police, humanitarian organizations, and activists (Ibid.) This perspective has been echoed by Minca and Collins (2021), who noted that, within this ‘circular movement’, many migrants constantly move back and forth between institutional centres and makeshift encampments, between humanitarian support and abandonment, and between relative visibility and invisibility (see also Rydzewski, 2023). Drawing on Tazzioli’s (2020) Foucauldian conceptualizations of migration management, Minca and Collins theorized that this circular mobility may be understood as ‘a strategically opaque form of governing through non-governing’ in which migrants’ ‘tactics of mobility’ and attempts to move on have been ‘indirectly supported’ by the Serbian government (2021: 2).

While many scholars have noted the substantial changes and shifts in the Route since the closure of the semi-formal humanitarian corridor that was opened for nearly a year from 2015–2016, publications based on more recent research (including many of those cited in the preceding paragraphs) have largely been more site-specific, with less of a ‘route’ focus. Perhaps this fragmentation in research reflects the fragmentation of the Balkan Route itself. As the Route has become more circuitous and more frequently interrupted by border policing, research has become correspondingly more focused on the dynamics of the Route as they emerge and evolve across specific sites. The

literature on this domain has maintained a strong focus on so-called ‘bottleneck’ or ‘chokepoint’ sites in particular – those sites where migrants remain ‘stuck’ for longer periods, and where more infrastructure and organizations emerge in response to their presence. These sites include: Greece, in particular the Greek Islands (among others, see: Jansen, 2025; Iliadou, 2023; Garelli & Tazzioli, 2018; Tsitsarakis & Petracou, 2023) and Athens (among others, see: Bejan & Glynn, 2024; Bird et al., 2021; Kreichauf, 2018; Mavrommatis, 2021; Papoutsis, 2021; Raimondi, 2019a, 2019b; Squire, 2018); Serbia (among others, see: Davies & Isakjee, 2019; Lukić, 2016; Mandić, 2021; Minca et al., 2018, 2019; Stojić-Mitrović, 2019; Obradovic-Wochnik, 2018; Rydzewski, 2020, 2023; Šantić et al., 2017; as well as Umek & Minca, Chapter 5, this volume); Bosnia and Herzegovina, and particularly the Una-Sana Canton (among others see: Augustova, 2024; Bendixsen 2023; Helms, 2023, 2024; Hromadžić, 2019, 2020, 2025; Minca & Umek, 2020; Šantić et al., 2022; Zocchi, 2023; as well as Gentili, Minca, & Weima, Chapter 6, this volume); and, to a lesser extent Trieste, Italy (Altin, 2021; Degli Uberti & Altin, 2024; as well as Minca & Umek, Chapter 7, this volume). These sites are significant because it is often here that state violence, and the violence of mobility regimes more broadly, becomes more visible, whether such violence is direct or takes place more structurally via forms of abandonment. Indeed, the second part of this volume builds on existing research in some of these key sites – specifically Serbia, the Una-Sana Canton in Bosnia, and Trieste, Italy – as entry points for exploring what it might mean to counter-map the Route at a range of intersecting scales.

Work conducted at the so-called ‘bottlenecks’ along the Route varies in focus. Hromadžić (2025: 10), for instance, has drawn attention to ‘local settings’ and infrastructures, and the ways in which ‘migrant lives and deaths are being incorporated in a patchy, uneven fashion’. Obradovic-Wochnik and Bird (2020: 41) examined the everyday ‘objects and things that constitute the “Balkan Route”’ – particularly visual objects – analysing how such artefacts shape spaces and function both as tools of European and state migration management and navigational aids for migrants themselves. Other authors have focused on forms of violence, including the connection between overt, spectacularized, and direct border violence, and slower, more structural forms of harm that emerge at specific sites (Augustova, 2024; Davies et al., 2017, 2024; de Vries & Guild, 2019). A substantial body of work, particularly by graduate students, has focused on international solidarians, volunteers, and activists (see, among many others, Cantat, 2020, 2021; Helms, 2023; Jordan & Moser, 2020; Milan & Pirro, 2018). Notably, scholarship drawing on postcolonial theory has emphasized the shared struggles of local populations in countries along the Route. This strand of research brings attention to local activists, volunteers, and movements, foregrounding their entanglement with the struggles of refugees – including in relation to the ‘European border regime’ and the

nation-state borders imposed following the dissolution of Yugoslavia (Bez nec & Kurnik, 2020; El Shaarawi & Razsa, 2019; Helms, 2023; Kurnik & Razsa, 2020; Rydzewski, 2023).

While undoubtedly vibrant, the literature on the Balkan Route remains highly uneven. Invisibilities persist, particularly in relation to the ‘Southern Balkans’ (North Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro) as well as Bulgaria, and arguably, the Croatia–Slovenia corridor. Additionally, there remains a notable gap in scholarship on Bosnia beyond the Una-Sana Canton, as well as on the current archipelago of formal reception facilities in mainland Greece, many of which have been rendered invisible. Yet these spaces too play a crucial role in the formation of the Route more broadly. While the chapters in Part I of this volume engage with the ‘Southern Balkan’ context to varying degrees, they do so through preliminary analysis, underscoring the need for further research – some of which is already underway within the framework of TheGAME ERC project at the time of writing. Calling for research on such spaces is not simply about drawing attention to clandestine migrant mobilities (which may benefit from remaining ‘invisible’ – a long-recurring ethical discussion in migration studies that has been covered by Khosravi, 2020, among others). Rather, as the initial chapters in this volume begin to explore in a partial and preliminary way, researching how the Route operates in these spaces may mean visibilizing obscured geographies and techniques of bordering, externalization, humanitarian custody, and violence – as well as the logics of governance that sustain them. At the same time, attending to such spaces may also open up possibilities for rethinking how overlooked local histories, solidarity, and struggles intersect with, shape, and are shaped by the Route. This remains the case even as the concept and scale of ‘the Route’ itself continue to be contested within critical scholarship on migration.

ROUTE THINKING?

As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, the concept of migratory route has been subjected to careful critiques in geography and the social sciences in recent years. In particular, the literature has focused on how the notion of the ‘route’ may be seen as a manifestation of a top-down hegemonic geographical imaginary – in other words, as a spatial metaphor and a ‘way-of-thinking-and-knowing’ that has often been adopted and popularized by state agencies and international organizations and put into practice via physical and institutional infrastructures aimed at managing the presence and mobility of ‘irregular’ migrants. According to Casas-Cortes and Cobarrubias (2021: 153), ‘routes thinking’ reflects a way of thinking about border management that relies upon imaginaries of “hypothetical migrants” itineraries. This episteme has increasingly come to be seen as common sense among policymakers and international

organizations, and even border guards themselves, shaping the ongoing reproduction of bordering practices and spaces along imagined routes.

From this perspective, and in alignment with other scholars – including Walters, Heller, and Pezzani (2021) or, later, Tazzioli (2024) – Casas-Cortes and Cobarrubias argue that ‘the identification of routes is a way to make the changing and mutable trajectories of migrants apprehendable, making the movements into a specific object’ (2021: 153). The adoption of the ‘route’ as both a concept and a perspective represents, for these authors, a geographical and cultural paradigm shift in how a diverse group – from think-tank members, INGO (international non-governmental organization) staff, and policymakers, to border guards – think ‘about the where and how of border work’ (Ibid.: 154). In other words, the political geography that emerges from this top-down form of ‘route thinking’ is understood by Casas-Cortes and Cobarrubias, as well as other scholars, as ‘a way to read migrant trajectories and make them targetable’, and as the construction of ‘a viapolitical infrastructure of illegalization’ around ‘members of undesired populations (as perceived by the EU) [who] are said to be moving inappropriately’ (Ibid.).

It is important to note here that this critique emerges in parallel with a broader criticism of how governments and international organizations tend to represent migration ‘cartographically’ – that is, as linear movements connecting fixed points on a map. These representations are often stripped of any other content, reducing migration to the mere (illegalized) crossing of borders and territories, and typically framing it as a mass movement of human beings that may be objectively represented via quantitative data (see, for example, Van Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020). While the quantitative dimension of the migration phenomenon undoubtedly carries significant political weight, such cartographic portrayals – according to a body of work critically engaging with what has been termed ‘cartographic reason’ (Farinelli, 1998; Pickles, 2004) – constitute a form of epistemic violence in and of themselves (Van Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2023). In the context of migration routes, these cartographies arguably lay the ground for, and even contribute to legitimizing, the violence later perpetrated at borders against people-on-the-move. For Tazzioli,

[m]aps reiterate a state-based knowledge about migration, at the same time that they envision tactics deployed for rerouting and foreseeing migration movements [...] This is because of the centrality of maps produced by states and international agencies about migrants’ movements, abstracting and translating them into linear routes and flows, with the purpose of diverting, containing and channelling them. (2024: 6)

The traditional cartography of migration, popularized by state agencies and the organizations that collaborate with them in the management of irregular migration, tends to naturalize the ‘irregular’ character of such movements.

It does so, at the very least, by reinforcing within the general public the perception of borders as inviolable and of the uncontrolled movement of masses of individuals across those borders as a threat to the social fabric and political stability of territorial nation-states. Cobarrubias, for instance, highlighted how Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, frames routes as ‘closed, displaced and reactivated’ and borrows academic terminology such as ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors to discuss the movements of ‘pockets’ of migrants (Andersson 2012: 9 in Cobarrubias, 2019: 11). The visualization of routes and mobilities is framed as ‘risk’ and illustrated through ‘routes-lines’ intended to depict the constantly shifting paths of people-on-the-move as tangible, traceable realities ‘on the ground’, cutting across ostensibly natural borderlines in a directed trajectory towards Europe (Ibid.). This mode of representation can then be ‘operationalized’ through military deployments and other forms of border defence and externalization.

In previous work (Carter-White & Minca, 2025), we have suggested that such representations of people-on-the-move along the Balkan Route constitute a manifestation of immunitarian biopolitics – a biopolitics that, by rendering borders selectively porous, contributes to the reproduction of the territorial logic of the nation-state based on the controlled presence of ‘undesirable’ populations on the move. These populations are consequently conceptualized and managed as a humanity-in-excess, whose presence serves to justify the proliferation of camps, the progressive militarization of borders, and even the expulsion of migrants by the authorities – often without any legal grounds. This is why, in reconsidering the intrinsic power of ‘route thinking’, it is particularly useful to focus on the possibility of crafting forms of counter-mapping in order to resist and subvert merely repressive ways of ‘seeing [migration] like a state’ and to advance new critical understandings of such informal mobilities across the European continent (Tazzioli, 2024: 4). For Tazzioli, while dominant mappings represent migration routes as a sequence of smooth border crossings,

[c]ounter-mapping practices are contrapuntal to maps that craft migration as a problem and to ‘invasion cartography’ (van Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020: 201), which consists in translating migration into flows & arrows that head towards Europe. In fact, at the core of counter-mapping there is the idea that mapping and knowing are co-constitutive. (Ibid.)

Indeed, even in maps that do not feature the now infamous ‘invasion’ arrows, an imaginary directionality or trajectory (towards Western Europe) can often be inferred through accompanying data on destination countries or from the broader context in which ‘migration flow’ data is presented (as in the case of IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix [DTM] flow monitoring reports for the Western Balkans [ex: IOM, 2023]). Mappings by state and humanitarian

organizations can vary significantly, and critical scholarship should be cautious not to oversimplify what can, in fact, be quite diverse cartographic representations. Humanitarian situation reports and related mappings may draw on and represent more complex data sets, including information on violent pushbacks and other forms of violence, deprivation, and the sometimes multi-year delays experienced during journeys. However, while these maps may not reproduce a putative 'smoothness' of journeys across borders and may be directed towards the facilitation of humanitarian response, presumed trajectories often remain. Like the most simplistic 'invasion cartography' arrows, even more complex representations of data on migration largely retain 'route thinking'.

Both Tazzioli (2024) and Cobarrubias (2019), in their analyses, revisited the notion of 'cartopolitics', first proposed by Bueno Lacy and Van Houtum (2015) – a concept that helps to think of maps 'as playing a crucial role in naturalizing geopolitical arbitrariness' (Casas-Cortes & Cobarrubias, 2021: 164) and supports the claim that maps do not provide a neutral representation of migration, but rather produce a specific Eurocentric political-geographical imaginary of migration as a one-way trajectory towards Europe that is threatening to the sovereignty of member states (Tazzioli, 2024: 6). While the quantitative accuracy and aims of these representations vary, they nevertheless work to project 'illegality' onto these movements beyond-but-towards Europe, and thus to legitimize and normalize restrictive migration control politics, policies, and practices (Casas-Cortes & Cobarrubias, 2021: 164–165).

Overall, we feel that we can align ourselves with this set of critical perspectives, especially in relation to mappings that, starting from the identification of presumed migratory 'routes', offer a specific interpretation of these transnational movements of people, whereby 'routes become the main visual protagonist grabbing the attention of the viewer, who instead of focusing on moments or lines of border crossing, starts to wander beyond the national perimeters following the hypothetical trajectories of migrants' (Cobarrubias, 2019: 12). In other words, the borders of individual states fade into the background, as the route, rather than specific borders, becomes the target of securitization and management (Ibid.).

While routes may be understood as spatial representations used by state and international agencies to depict migration towards Europe in a 'linear' and unidirectional manner – as well as to implement and legitimize measures of control, as the critical literature just reviewed convincingly suggests – it is also worth considering, in the context of the Balkan Route examined in this volume, whether the notion of route has also taken on meanings beyond those described here. In other words, how can a route be counter-mapped, or thought of differently? Tazzioli has pointed out that counter-mapping does not refer solely to the literal creation of alternative maps to counter hegemonic mappings: 'it also encompasses different knowledge production practices

which radically question and disrupt the ways in which social phenomena are mapped, known and made visible' (2024: 4). Accordingly, counter-mapping encompasses the knowledge and tactics of irregularized migrants – often 'non-cartographic' ways of knowing, assembled through the diverse sources of information compiled by people-on-the-move, as well as their negotiation of how states and other institutions may identify them (such as through digital biometric data) (Ibid.: 6).

A significant example of such embodied and experience-based counter-mapping is evident in migrants' navigation of the so-called 'Game'. The 'Game' is an ambivalent name for migrants' attempts to cross European borders, despite frequent and often violent pushbacks, which we discuss further later in this chapter (Minca & Collins, 2021). In conceptualizing the 'Game', we have argued that the migratory corridor through the Balkans is the result of, and based on, a true counter-geography produced 'from below' by migrants and those who have helped them on their irregular journeys and border crossings, including solidarity networks and humanitarian organizations, but also the smugglers that operate along the Route.

A final aspect that emerges in critiques of hegemonic 'route thinking' concerns the distinction between a 'route' and a 'corridor', and the importance of understanding the historical interconnectedness of both modes of passage in shaping the current Balkan Route. Kasperek (2016), for instance, offers keen insights into the 'semi formal humanitarian corridor' that opened along the Balkan Route during the so-called long summer of migration. What had previously been 'an invisible path across the Balkans [...] first established by these movements of migration' became, by August 2015, the focus of European and global media attention. Kasperek described this moment as marking a shift from a pre-existing migration route to a corridor partially managed by the countries of transit and those of potential destination in the Schengen area. In contrast to a route, a corridor is theorized by Kasperek as a more narrowly channelled passage (see also Cuttitta, forthcoming), and as a novel spatial strategy for governing migration, implemented alongside the creation of so-called 'hotspots'. In this way, sovereignty began to shift from individual states towards European institutions – particularly in countries affected by the 'Euro-crisis' – a shift legitimized in part by the cartopolitics of migration outlined above (Kasperek, 2016: 2).

From Kasperek's perspective, while the corridor allowed for the relatively free movement of thousands of migrants across the region for a limited period, it represented a 'half-way bridge to Europe', as it facilitated access to asylum systems at the end of these journeys, and the possible – but not guaranteed – end to the limbo of irregular or non-defined status (Kasperek, 2016: 8). Following Mezzadra and Neilson (2013: 208), he describes spaces like the one defined by this temporary humanitarian corridor as 'spaces of legal voidness,

they are saturated by competing norms and calculations that overlap and sometimes conflict in unpredictable but also negotiable ways' (Kasperek, 2016: 8). This 'historical' moment of 'openness' represents a crucial juncture in all subsequent debates on the Balkan Route. Following its official closure in March 2016, the corridor reverted to its status as a semi-invisible informal route – that is, a space where 'competing norms and calculations' (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013: 208), along with their unforeseeable interactions and outcomes, have consolidated into a specific border regime (Kasperek, 2016).

If the critique of specific institutional forms of 'route thinking' discussed above is entirely legitimate – and if we fully acknowledge that such thinking is intimately linked to the cartopolitics of the institutions engaged simultaneously in the representation *and* control of 'irregular' migrations – then a further step is needed. In the final part of this chapter, we would like to explore how other forms of 'route thinking', and the cartographies associated with them, may relate to counter-geographies produced by the desire and determination of people-on-the-move to complete their journeys and overcome all the obstacles imposed by a specific regional border regime. In other words, what we will argue in the next section is the need to recognize the existence of alternative, informal notions of 'thinking like a route' – that is, a parallel set of discourses and practices which allow us to conclude that other relevant subjects also conceive of and experience the Balkan Route as a 'route'.

COUNTER-MAPPING THE BALKAN ROUTE

The 'Game'

What has emerged from the more than eighty interviews we have conducted with migrants in Trieste and Sarajevo over the past year or so is that alternative forms of 'route thinking' are not only normalized by the migrants themselves, but in many ways represent a manifestation of counter-mapping and an attempt to make legible the type of turbulent, erratic, and changing geographies they are both carving and to which they are subjected. From this, a specific counter-geography emerges in response to the institutional cartographies discussed in the previous sections – a counter-geography that must be taken into account in our conceptual engagement with this specific migration context. In the pages to follow, therefore, we propose imaginatively engaging with the dimensions of both 'route thinking' and 'route making', which we have explored in some detail in the early stages of our project, and which are to some extent reflected in the structure of this volume.

In the first book of this series, *A Spatial Theory of the Camp*, we traced how these distinct but interrelated dimensions of the Route can be observed through a focus on camps – both as a key spatial technology of migration

management and as a crucial infrastructure in the journeys of many migrants. Importantly, the book highlights that the immunitarian biopolitical logics of the camps cannot be separated from broader geopolitical strategies. In the case of the camps along the Balkan Route, these geopolitical strategies (see Bejan & Glynn, 2024; Bendixsen, 2023; Bird et al., 2021; Helms, 2024; Hromadžić, 2020; Kreichauf, 2018; Minca & Umek, 2020; Obradovic-Wochnik, 2018; Rydzewski, 2020; Šantić et al., 2022; Umek et al., 2019) are primarily aimed at governing and managing migration. They are grounded in forms of 'route thinking' adopted by state and humanitarian authorities in the Balkan region, the EU, and some of its member states. However, this response is highly ambivalent. Indeed, as noted by Carter-White and Minca (2025: 111),

charting the implementation of geopolitical visions entails taking into consideration the further complexity that arises in the day-to-day management and workings of camps; this includes the 'madness' and contradictions that emerge when a given geopolitical vision conceived from above is translated into practices that impact the lives and bodies of the multitude of individuals 'contained' at these sites.

Even as they exercise control over informal migration, by directing and re-directing migrants' movements, camps also provide spaces of basic humanitarian care and offer the respite needed to continue on difficult journeys. Keeping migrants largely separate from local populations in formal camps and in conditions of minimal care may both slow down mobility and, at the same time, help to keep migrants on the move towards their intended destinations. Importantly, however,

this is not to suggest that migrant mobilities along the Balkan Route are simply the passive outcome of orchestrations by the EU and individual states. Most informal migrants view the non-EU states through which their movement is channelled as places of transit rather than final destinations, even though they may stay there for years and even apply for asylum in these countries. (Ibid.: 73)

Despite the violence of border regimes and restrictions on migrants' movements along the Route, migrants can make 'tactical use' of institutional camps and the related migration management mechanisms, based on their own 'route thinking' and desire to continue their journeys.

At the crux of the creation and continuation of the Route, across its multiplicitous iterations following the closure of the humanitarian corridor, is 'the Game'. As analysed in a paper by Minca and Collins (2021), this ambivalent term, of uncertain origin, has come to describe the attempts of migrants to (re)enter the EU by crossing borders (see also Zocchi, 2024). For Minca and Collins (2021: 5), the term is a spatial metaphor that encompasses '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'. These attempts are often unsuccessful, requiring individuals on the move to try and try again in the face of difficult conditions and often violent pushbacks.

This 'Game' undoubtedly results from the ways in which migration is informalized, disciplined, and managed. It thus encompasses the involvement of state authorities, the geopolitics of EU bordering, and EU funding of humanitarian sites in the 'buffer zone'. Following Tazzioli's (2020) theorization of 'governance by mobility', which includes the dispersal and forced circularity of migrants under border regimes, 'the Game' may be understood as a manifestation of the tactics used by authorities to keep migrants scattered, unsettled, and on the move within the Route, including via the use of camps described above. In the face of such governance, 'the Game' may be understood as 'a tactical spatial response by migrants' (Carter-White & Minca, 2025: 126).

Accordingly, 'the Game' retains 'an element of hope', given that the vast majority of people believe they will make it and remain determined despite taking great risks (Minca & Collins, 2021: 5). Indeed, the Route would never have come into existence – nor would it have persisted – were it not for the ways in which people, left 'stranded' by the closure of the humanitarian corridor, continued to 'forge their own informal pathways' in the face of increasing securitization, violence, pushbacks, and other setbacks along their journeys (Carter-White & Minca, 2025: 71). This forging of independent pathways, we argue, is the result of a form of 'route thinking' which is contrapuntal to the 'route thinking' of migration management actors. It imagines a route that may be forged in spite of institutional barriers, and in spite of all the de-routings, detours, and disruptions that migrants' trajectories may entail.

Connecting Scales

In our two previous works (Carter-White & Minca, 2025; Minca & Collins, 2021), we underlined the importance of understanding the Balkan Route as an ever-changing assemblage of spatialities and temporalities – an assemblage shaped by different actors operating simultaneously at different scales, each contributing in distinct ways to the formation of the actual spatialities of this informal corridor. This perspective explains why, in this book, we have chosen to devote the first three chapters to a critical analysis of how certain key states and institutions have interpreted this corridor 'as a route', which is consistent with critical readings of the phenomenon advanced in the related geographical debate.

One of the reasons it was important for the opening chapters to analyse these institutional mappings – related, as we shall see, to camps, asylum procedures,

and border walls – is that they reveal, at least in part, how the Route is conceived from a state perspective by a range of institutional actors. Indeed, borders and other infrastructures affecting the Route are all managed at the level of the individual state, despite the influence and financial weight of the EU and its policies (Carter-White & Minca, 2025). This is reflected, for instance, in the ways systems of hospitality and protection are strategically implemented – or withheld – as well as in state authorities' strategic 'abandonment' of segments of the corridor, and of the people within them, to the control of smugglers or, in many cases, to the interstitial geographies made up of makeshift camps, jungles, and other informal arrangements driven by the need of people-on-the-move to continue their journeys (Ibid.). This dualistic form of 'route thinking', with its tightly interconnected strands, has a profound impact on migrants, exposing them to a wide range of hardships and risks, including, in some cases, direct violence at borders (see Chapter 6, this volume). It also leaves them vulnerable to harsh natural elements and weather, given that it is increasingly difficult to cross borders under safe conditions. At the same time, the counter-geographies produced by migrant and smuggler 'route thinking' may be interpreted as a tactical response to institutional 'route thinking' and the repressive practices associated with it (Minca & Collins, 2021; Tazzioli, 2020).

One way of differentiating between these two forms of 'route thinking' might be to conceptualize them in terms of geographical imaginaries and geographical imagination – both of which draw on and (re)produce ideas about space and place, thereby powerfully shaping the material world (Giesekeing, 2017). Institutional 'route thinking' may be understood as a powerful geographical imaginary at the service of migration management, externalization, and securitization. It is perhaps not a singular imaginary but is bound up with well-known and previously critiqued 'imaginative geographies' such as Orientalism (Said, 1994), Balkanism (Todorova, 2009), as well as with imaginaries of the nation-state and its borders. Yet, geographical imagination is not only the preserve of the powerful; it can equally be a 'subaltern resource' (Daniels, 2011: 183; Jazeel, 2014). Undoubtedly, the journeys of people-on-the-move also require creative and dynamic geographical imaginations. Migrant geographical imagination is not only about how desired destinations are envisioned, as represented in some migration scholarship (ex: Robins, 2019). Rather, we understand the migrant geographical imagination as embedded in and continuously re-shaped by the lived experience of crossing borders and terrain, dwelling in camps and forests, and negotiating diverse migration management systems along with the ever-changing information encountered en route – in other words, the geographical imagination which is the basis for 'the Game'. This geographical imagination is also a form of 'route thinking', and allows people-on-the-move to navigate ever-changing trajectories and, in so doing, to continuously (re)create a dynamic route.

We thus propose that ‘institutional route thinking’ and its associated cartopolitics are generated in response to the consolidated presence of migratory mobilities in a specific region and by the attempt to conceptualize (and visualize) these very mobilities as a problem, as a threat, and as an element of disorder and violation of the territorial sovereignty of the state. At the same time, we contend that forms of ‘route thinking from below’ – affectively represented by the notion of ‘the Game’ at the core of our research project – emerge both from the authentically geographical strategies of smuggling networks, which seek to capitalize on constantly shifting border practices, and from the tactical, often imaginative responses of people-on-the-move to the near impossibility of legally seeking asylum and better living conditions in the region.

One of the key questions this book seeks to address is how to connect these differently constructed scales – and practices – of ‘route making’ in the Balkans. A useful starting point may be to reflect on some key aspects of the above-described dual and closely related manifestations of ‘route thinking’, and to consider whether analysing their meaning helps us to more effectively ‘think of the Balkan Route as a route’. First, the existing literature makes clear that

the role of cartography becomes key in constituting the current logics of migration management: we think of maps not as providing a mere representation of routes, but as practices that bring them into being, and which are also instrumental in the contestation over routes. (Casas-Cortes & Cobarrubias, 2021: 154)

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that the EU has not always managed migration through a ‘routes strategy’; rather, this approach has developed over time (Ibid.: 159).

The institutional ‘routes strategy’ has been reflected ‘on the ground’ in a tendency towards the formalization and standardization of various sites along the Route, corresponding to the increasing campization of national hospitality systems, while alternative accommodation options have gradually been phased out (see Chapter 2, this volume). This series of top-down interventions has also resulted in the closure of several informal camps and the forced relocation of people to formal camp facilities in many countries along the Route, particularly in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (see Chapters 5 and 6, this volume). In this context, ‘thinking of migration as a state’ has meant that efforts to regulate asylum procedures along the Balkan Route have remained largely inconsistent and ad hoc; despite processes of ‘Europeanization’, accession requirements, and various bilateral and multilateral agreements (see Chapter 3, this volume), in practice, asylum systems and centres have continued to operate in divergent ways across different countries. The cartographies embedded in institutional ‘route thinking’ have also served to justify growing political and financial

investment in securitization. This is reflected in the physical infrastructure of the camps – in fences topped with barbed wire or even cement walls – and, even more prominently, in the construction of border walls at several key points along the Route (see Chapter 4, this volume). Such developments have made migrants' journeys increasingly difficult and dangerous, while simultaneously framing them as an imminent threat and contributing to a progressively more carceral atmosphere, even in so-called 'open' centres, where the prospect of full closure becomes ever more likely.

These emerging political geographies along the corridor clearly reflect institutional 'route thinking' – especially in contexts where similar strategies have been adopted by different countries in the region, significantly influencing and being influenced by broader geopolitical dynamics. On one hand, countries such as Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have for some time played the role of buffer zones. These states have provided substantial EU-funded humanitarian assistance to people-on-the-move, while simultaneously implicitly facilitating the continuation of their journeys and rendering asylum procedures effectively inaccessible (Ahmetašević & Mlinarević, 2019; Mandić, 2021; Stojić-Mitrović, 2019). The consequences of these interventions have been profound for migrants, reflecting not only the ambivalence but also the pervasiveness of the EU's – particularly certain member states' – efforts to contain, filter, delay, or even obstruct informal mobilities towards the Schengen area (Petričević, 2022; Tazzioli, 2020).

This has also led to the increasing marginalization of migrants from major urban centres and, more broadly, from the everyday lives of local populations along the corridor. This process reflects a deliberate strategy of invisibilization (see Chapter 6, this volume). At the same time, specific sites and occasions emerge in which people-on-the-move become hyper-visible – such as in formal refugee camps or through interactions with other specialized institutions. The dynamics of invisibility and the selective spatio-temporalities of hyper-visibility are, however, also loosely connected to the emergence of grassroots forms of 'route thinking' in the Balkans. This points to the complex interplay between visibility and invisibility negotiated by people-on-the-move and those who support their clandestine journeys. On the one hand, the increased securitization of the Route and its borders has clearly contributed to the strengthening of smuggling networks. On the other, much state infrastructure and the related policies – which may appear, at first glance, to be aimed at immobilizing people-on-the-move – actually serve to channel their mobility in specific ways. For example, many asylum facilities or other camp infrastructures implicitly encourage onward movement, often by offering a brief period of rest. This pattern was repeatedly confirmed in interviews with individuals who had successfully completed the Route and reached Trieste in Italy.

This is precisely why, in the second part of this book – and throughout our broader research project – we have foregrounded migrants’ perspectives on the Route, examining how their experiences shape its spatio-temporal reproduction. Several chapters reveal a multiplicity of trajectories and assemblages of knowledge and practices that together form a kind of mapping of the Balkan Route. This mapping reimagines the Route as a space of desire – for onward movement – and of determination – to succeed in what is often referred to as ‘the Game’. Migrants must deftly weave counter-maps that take into consideration both visible territorial borders and less tangible ‘invisible administrative-legal boundaries’. The latter include an array of ‘spatial tactics’ enacted by states, such as pushbacks and deportations (Tazzioli, 2024: 6):

Migrants’ maps are counter-geographies in action not only insofar as they dodge states’ spatial traps but also because they unsettle the (cartographic) assumption about knowing as unveiling. Indeed, migrants’ maps shift the focus from a spatial visualisation of the routes towards modes of knowing as assembling. In a way, they destabilise the binary opposition that sustains cartographic knowledge between making visible and keeping invisible: even if migrants’ maps can be translated into a route, the ‘counter’ dimension of those maps relies precisely on their irreducibility to the spatial representation of their journey.

These ways of knowing – both shaped by and essential to navigating routes that are themselves continuously reshaped by states’ cartographic knowledge and practices – may be understood as forming a distinct counter-geography. Hegemonic cartographies that seek to ‘unveil’ or trace routes often fail to ‘grasp’ the subjectivities generated by migrants’ own navigation and mapping practices, which also incorporate the physical, legal and psychological impacts of borders (Ibid.). ‘Route thinking’ thus gives rise to unique migrant subjectivities – rooted in the embodied experience and assembled knowledge of navigating the Route, and desire for onward mobility – while simultaneously negotiating the ways in which routes are imagined and thus managed by institutional and state actors. It is precisely in this way that both forms of ‘route thinking’ shape one another in the making of the Balkan Route.

‘Thinking like a route’ therefore, despite all the issues with and implications of the term, can nonetheless serve as a valuable methodological lens – one that allows us to cultivate a geographical imagination of our own. Such a geographical imagination equips us to critically engage with the geographical imaginaries embedded in hegemonic forms of ‘route thinking’, while also attending to their dynamic interplay with the geographical imaginations formed and reformed by determined people-on-the-move whose journeys endlessly (re)produce a route.

Thinking Like a Route

In reflecting on what it may mean to ‘think like a route’, we also draw inspiration from existing research on migratory routes. Ethnographic research concerning migration in Central America stands out in this respect. Notably, the ethnographic monographs, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (2015) by Jason De León; *The Migrant Passage: Clandestine Journeys from Central America* (2018) by Noëlle Brigden; and *Lives in Transit: Violence and Intimacy on the Migrant Journey* (2018) by Wendy Vogt, all draw attention to how people negotiate journeys of clandestine migration from Central America, through Mexico, and finally crossing (or aiming to cross) the border with the United States, risking being caught and returned. All three scholars have conducted multi-site ethnographic research, with work by Brigden and De León also crossing national borders, while Vogt’s analysis considered transit migration in relation to broader journeys from sites within Mexico. Accounts by border-crossers of their own experiences are an important element in the research presented in these books, which each, in their own way, offer perspectives on routes and borders ‘from below’.

All three ethnographies interpret the creation – and the increasingly violent and precarious conditions – of the clandestine route as direct outcomes of state policies and practices. In particular, they highlight the role of externalized US strategies of migration criminalization and the borderization of spaces that span multiple state jurisdictions.

The experience of the journey is clandestine transnationalism that is called into existence by the very effort of the State to stop it. As the anthropology of criminalization reveals, clandestine activities are never autonomous from the state, but instead are constituted by their illegality. As they return from deportations or failed border crossings, migrants continue to make multiple journeys not despite of the State but because of it. (Brigden, 2018: 18)

Beyond the violence of state (in)action, migration policing, by causing more clandestine movement, has exacerbated the threat of violence against migrants by driving an increase in organized criminal groups within the Route (Ibid.: 85). This increased violence was a predicted, and perhaps even intended effect of the USA’s ‘prevention through deterrence’ strategy (De León, 2015: 249). Yet, research shows that deterrence efforts are largely ineffective (Ibid.: 101): ‘la migra’s fancy equipment is no match for the sheer determination that propels hundreds of thousands of economic migrants’ (Ibid.: 163).

In a border zone that ‘could easily be a place of devastation and uncertainty, void of hope, and for some it is’ (Vogt, 2018: 212), people nevertheless persevere. Even when they remain stuck for long periods and experience the circular migration of returns, they still think of the route as a trajectory that

they may, one day, complete. All three authors note the centrality of hope for those seeking to continue their clandestine transnational journeys. As in our earlier account of 'the Game' in the context of the Balkan Route, without these migrants' determination there would be no route.

In this context, De León (2015) theorizes the route using Callon and Law's (1995) concept of hybrid collectif, which draws together the human and non-human components of the route that act in concert with one another. This concept is mobilized as a way to engage with the complexity of an evolving migration route – without ever claiming to fully capture or contain it:

Because of the scale, complexity, and randomness of the crossing milieu, it is impossible to account for or describe every single element or actant involved in this process. This is a difficulty characteristic of all hybrid collectifs. They can never be fully illuminated and it is impossible to identify all parts of the system from one spot. (De León, 2015: 43)

Vogt similarly notes the impossibility of any 'finished' study of such complex and changing contexts, given that ethnographers attempt to 'connect lived experience to larger historical trajectories' (2018: 24). In navigating these complex and dangerous environments, and thus becoming incorporated into the collectif, migrants acquire knowledge through experience, increasing their chances of 'making it'. Knowledge and negotiation are also central to Brigden's research on migrant 'route making' in Central America.

One of the core questions for Brigden (2018: 6) is how migrants and facilitators imagine and attempt to navigate a constantly changing and violent route, with very few resources. Attending to migrants' physical encounters, whether with people or terrain along the route, she identifies three key, interrelated themes: the uncertainty characterizing the dangers of the route; the improvisation demanded of migrants to navigate this uncertainty; and the related dynamic emergence of resources and encounters along the way. Drawing on Reece Jones' (2012) theorization of border zones as 'spaces of refusal', Brigden argues that 'along the route, migrants convert information into practice with imagination and improvisation, generating alternative ways of seeing, knowing, and being' beyond imposed categories and hegemonic migration governance regimes' (2018: 23). In this way, 'the unchoreographed, individual survival strategies employed by migrants generate a dynamic transnational social space that complicates the governance of borders' (Ibid.).

Notably, all three authors conduct at least part of their research within migrant shelters, highlighting the importance of shelters to the route (for migrants, surrounding communities, states, and researchers), but also their ambivalence (again, for all of the groups just listed). Shelters are extremely diverse in nature, ranging from the dirt-floored back rooms of small churches

to concrete compounds surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by private security staff. They can also entertain different kinds of relationships with state actors. These highly visible sites along the clandestine route are sites of humanitarian support, as well as of formal and informal information about the route-to-come. However, as such, shelters may be ‘both a source of vulnerability and a resource for survival’ (Brigden, 2018: 16). Vogt describes shelters as places of both ‘(in)security and safety’ (2018: 155), noting the complicated relationship of shelters with local communities,³ including their framing in some communities as sites of insecurity, as well as attacks against shelters by local residents, and the ways people may be ‘preyed upon’ in shelters. She describes the emergence of the ‘securitized shelter’ in a context of widespread militarization of security, dwelling ambivalently on the contradictions of safety and security they embody. While often theorized as distinct from camps, this focus on shelters as key nodes within routes, and their relation to other clandestine sites and the route more broadly, offers key insights into the methodological possibilities and challenges of studying routes from locationally fixed but dynamic institutional spaces such as camps.

For Vogt, the processes described in relation to Central American migration ‘transcend the particularities’ of that space and bear relevance to the ways in which people around the world:

negotiate the increasingly perilous and ever-changing conditions of global clandestine transit journeys [...] While the dynamics of hiring a smuggler, finding transportation, and seeking aid to cross the deserts of Niger or the waters of the Mediterranean are unique and distinct from those processes in Mexico, they speak to the social, political, and economic consequences of a more heavily militarized and bordered world. (Vogt, 2018: 207)

Indeed, these ethnographies offer a compelling foundation for what it might mean to ‘think like a route’ when studying clandestinized overland migration in Europe. They invite an analysis that moves across interconnected scales, taking into consideration diverse actors, processes, contexts, environments, and migration regimes.

Route Methodologies

Our project is nevertheless distinct from the route ethnographies discussed above – not only due to its European context, but also because it is being

³ Also of particular interest is that all three authors consider the implications for the places and societies traversed by migratory routes, emphasizing how these locations are dynamically, distinctly, and unevenly shaped through their interactions with the route.

conducted by a research team working collaboratively across multiple sites in several countries, rather than by a single ethnographer moving between locations. While some team members are mobile along the Balkan Route, others are embedded in specific locations. Yet the research remains fundamentally multi-sited and rooted in ongoing collaboration and shared analysis. Of course, studying such a vast route can never be the work of just one individual. Whether a researcher operates alone, or as part of a team, knowledge of such a context is always constructed relationally and collaboratively. Researchers themselves are part of the assemblage of the Route, even if our role may appear marginal. As emphasized by the authors referenced above, our goal is not to produce a complete or definitive documentation or theorization of the Route – such a task is simply impossible. Rather, this project aspires to offer a form of ‘counter-mapping’, which itself is something new and inherently political. In studying the Route, we too become part of its ongoing (re)mapping.

A key methodological challenge lies in bridging the grand cartographic imaginaries of state and supra-state ‘route thinking’ – and the corresponding migration management regimes – with the micro-scale impacts of the Route as experienced by individuals, and the embodied ‘route thinking’ of actors ‘on the ground’ in diverse contexts. This is a challenge that this book only partially addresses and which we certainly do not claim to have captured in all its complexity. Nevertheless, the chapters collectively engage with multiple levels of analysis, exploring the potential of ‘thinking like a route’ across scales.

The chapters in Part I focus on the various infrastructures (asylum systems, camps, and walls) built by authorities at sites across the Balkan Route, relating them to how the Route is imagined – the ‘route thinking’ of state and supranational actors. These chapters largely draw on secondary data and the existing literature, yet they offer novel readings of infrastructural patterns, as well as suggesting directions for future research. In attempting to analyse infrastructures at a ‘route scale’ (a scale that, like any other, is constructed), each chapter identifies recurring patterns as well as critical context-specific divergences. These divergences are especially evident at the level of individual states, which continue to play a significant role in migration management, even as supranational organizations exert considerable influence.

Each of the three chapters in Part II focuses on a specific locale along the Route but does so at a different scale: a state, a canton, and a city. Such a multi-scalar approach, we argue, offers a way to avoid the trap of ‘methodological nationalism’ (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002) and other overly bounded frameworks for studying migration (Schwarz, 2020) (what geographers might refer to as a ‘container space’ approach). By grounding each case in empirical and analytical connections to broader dynamics of mobility and mobility governance along the Route, these chapters move beyond isolated analyses. Each explicitly engages with the relationship between the specificities of the

(non)governance of migration in the given locale, the wider migration regime shaped by 'route thinking', and how these intersect with the routes and desired trajectories of irregularized migrants beyond the specific space under analysis. As suggested by Schapendonk et al., 'a place-based perspective enables us to understand how various trajectories (of return or intended onward movement) intertwine in places and intersect with mobility regimes' (2020: 213). Indeed, scholarship on migration has found that 'mobility regimes may have important local connotations', even between cities in a given state (Schwarz, 2020: 219), as well as through time. This is certainly the case across the Balkan Route, as this set of chapters demonstrates. Furthermore, within a route, as Part II illustrates, such 'local connotations' both actively respond to and in turn shape how the Route is navigated and constantly assembled. Additionally, these chapters begin to address the kinds of subjectivities that are produced by route geographies, as people framed as illegalized 'humanity-in-excess' navigate diverse locales.

A notable thread running through the volume is the central focus in several chapters (2, 4, 5, and 6) on formal camp systems. These chapters reflect a broader tendency to forcibly dismantle informal encampments and transfer people into formalized camps, accompanied by increased patrolling of former sites to prevent reoccupation. As a result, makeshift camps are becoming increasingly precarious and peripheral. This formalization in the management of the Route on the part of the authorities has gone hand in hand with the distancing of informal migration from urban centres and its growing invisibilization. At the same time, it has created sites of agglomeration where migrants become hyper-visible. This process is often intertwined with securitization, reflected in the materialities of many camps, and linked to investment in the securitization of the Route more broadly (in terms of border walls and fences, as well as border surveillance and policing). Such material infrastructures all contribute to framing people-on-the-move as threats to security.

Yet, as with all state-centric approaches to migration infrastructure, even as they have been shaped by European funding, each chapter addresses how the geopolitics of migration are differently articulated in different spaces, both at the state and sub-national level. Accordingly, these are sites of tension, contradictions, and endless negotiations, reflecting the broader ambivalences inherent in the making of the Balkan Route. For example, much of the infrastructure and policies, which at a glance seemed designed to keep people in place, in reality channel their movement in specific directions, or are negotiated in unplanned ways by people-on-the-move. The chapters in Part II highlight how many of the contradictions marking the governance of the Route are embodied in the shifting temporalities of migrant mobility – whether through policies that hold people in prolonged states of liminality, or those that compel them to move on, or at least attempt to do so, over and over

again. These tensions, contradictions, and ambivalences of the Route generate conditions of exhaustion, uncertainty, and fear. Yet, they are continually negotiated through the persistence and endurance of people-on-the-move with their own 'route thinking' from below. It is therefore essential not to overlook the counter-geographies forged by these multiple subjectivities on-the-move along this corridor in Europe as they engage with a rich diversity of spaces, places, and communities.

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PART I

Mappings

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2. Transit campization and the shifting Balkan Route camp archipelago

Yolanda Weima

INTRODUCTION: THE BALKAN ROUTE CAMP ARCHIPELAGO

Even before Europe's 'long summer of migration' in 2015, various types of formal camps were central to state and humanitarian migration management infrastructure along the Balkan Route – a role that has increased in prominence over the past decade. These camps play a vital role in the 'making of the Route', as they serve 'to halt, contain, delay, but also accelerate and otherwise coordinate the informal circulation of people-on-the-move around Europe' (Carter-White & Minca, 2025: 85; Collins & Minca, 2024; Minca et al., 2018). While camps provide vital humanitarian aid and shelter to many, they are also instrumental to state efforts to manage migration. This blend of care, control, and custody, often termed 'humanitarian governance', has been explored in the literature on refugee camps globally (see, among others, Collins et al., 2022; Hyndman, 2000, 2018; McConnachie, 2016; Pallister-Wilkins, 2020; Picker & Pasquetti, 2015). However, the spatio-temporal dynamics of humanitarian governance along the Balkan Route differ significantly from those explored in much of the existing camp literature. This distinction stems from their predominantly transit-oriented nature, which I trace across the Route in this chapter.

While debates persist over the precise definition of 'a camp', the term remains meaningful, even when applied broadly (Abourahme, 2020; Carter-White & Minca, 2025; Kreichauf, 2018; Martin et al., 2020; Turner, 2016; Weima & Brankamp, 2022). This chapter relies on an expansive definition of 'formal camps' to analyze those established along the Balkan Route since 2015, including asylum centres, accommodation facilities, registration and temporary accommodation centres, detention centres, temporary reception centres, transit centres, centres for aliens, centres for foreigners, and other

forms of formal migrant accommodation.¹ ‘Formal’ is itself a challenging term to define, as there is often no clear binary between formal and makeshift camps. Rather, camps exist on a continuum (Jordan & Minca, 2023; Katz, 2017; Martin et al., 2020). In this chapter, I consider a wide range of heterogeneous sites managed or formally designated by states and/or by large humanitarian organizations. I focus particularly on the most common types of camps along the Route: specifically, asylum-oriented infrastructure and transit-oriented temporary accommodation.

The Balkan ‘camp archipelago’ has been anything but static, with camps opening, transforming, and closing over time. Shaped by shifting geopolitical contexts, the establishment, closure, and management of camps both respond to and seek to influence how irregularized migrants navigate (im)mobility across the region. Despite the vastly uneven literature and information available about camps along the Route, it is still possible to identify emergent commonalities and patterns at various sites and at various times since 2015. Broadly, I note a shift from the ad hoc use of asylum centres as transit or temporary hosting infrastructure to the development of increasingly container-based, explicitly temporary reception camps spanning the Route from Macedonia² to Slovenia. Such changes have been uneven, emerging, and sometimes even reversing in different countries at different times, with exceptions to the broader patterns. Nonetheless, these trends speak to forms of spatio-temporal migration governance that transcend national boundaries, simultaneously shaping and being shaped by the Route itself.

In this chapter, I highlight these patterns within the so-called ‘Western Balkans’³ regions of the route, thus excluding Greece and Bulgaria.⁴ However,

¹ For the purposes of this chapter, I do not include airport or marine port detention facilities, or small temporary holding sites at border posts in my analysis, although these undoubtedly play a part in de-routing, forced returns, and the overall shaping of the Route. Neither do I include ‘safe houses’ and other institutional accommodation intended solely for the shelter of unaccompanied minors.

² In this text, I use ‘Macedonia’ as the conventional shorthand term for both the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (until 2018) and the Republic of North Macedonia (from 2018 onwards).

³ I use the term ‘Western Balkans’ while also acknowledging it is a contentious term, as it is often linked to a particular geopolitical spatial imaginary adopted by states and international humanitarian organizations (Cocco, 2017; Lika, 2024).

⁴ While Greece and Bulgaria are integral to the Balkan Route and play significant roles in the camp archipelago of this migration corridor, they are not the focus of this chapter for a number of reasons. First, the camps on the Greek islands have already been extensively studied (e.g., Illiadou, 2023; Pallister-Wilkins, 2020; Tazzioli, 2018; Topak, 2020; Tsagarousianou, 2023; Vradis et al., 2020). Second, although research on the mainland camp system remains relatively limited, the

I include analysis of Croatia and Slovenia (though they do not always feature in the 'Western Balkans' imaginary) to further illustrate how the trends I identify have emerged at different times and manifested in distinct ways across the Route. In so doing, this chapter provides an original analysis of the literature and available information on camps within so-called 'invisibilized spatialities' of the southern Balkans. Specifically, it traces these patterns in Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania, and Kosovo,⁵ all of which remain comparatively under-researched. While separate chapters in this volume focus on the camp geographies of Serbia and the Una-Sana Canton in Bosnia and Herzegovina,⁶ this chapter does not analyse these areas in the same detail. Instead, I reference them to highlight the broader applicability of these patterns across the Route (see Chapters 5 and 6, this volume). Additionally, I discuss the camp system in Bosnia beyond the Una-Sana Canton to illustrate the wider relevance of these patterns within that country.

The next section begins by examining the unevenness of the available academic, journalistic, and grey English-language literature on which the chapter is based. I explore the challenges of even identifying and describing formal camps in certain countries and consider possible reasons for these lacunae. Following this, I discuss the initial repurposing of pre-2015 asylum centres along the corridor as transit infrastructure, analysing how asylum infrastructure was ultimately largely sidelined within the Route – albeit with some exceptions and occasional reversions. The subsequent section introduces the phenomenon I term 'transit campization' along the Route, drawing on Kreichauf's (2018) notion of 'campization' in asylum infrastructure. Here, I focus on the opening (and closure) of designated transit and temporary reception camps as a key spatial-temporal technology of migration governance along the Route, emphasizing the increasing role of 'containerization' in this process.

task of tracing the more than thirty camps and the constantly shifting archipelago of accommodations across the Greek mainland exceeds the scope of this chapter. Finally, the Bulgarian camp system has been the subject of minimal academic, journalistic, or NGO research (Otova & Staykova, 2019); notably, the Bulgarian system largely predates 2015 and appears to function in a manner distinct from the patterns examined here.

⁵ This designation is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

⁶ I use both 'Bosnia' as shorthand for Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the full name, for variety in this text.

UNEVENNESS, IN/VISIBILIZATION, AND THE LITERATURE

This chapter draws primarily on English-language scholarly literature, journalistic accounts, and grey literature related to camps along the Route.⁷ The availability of information about camps varies drastically across both time and space. Some camps and camp systems – particularly those in Greece, Serbia, and Bosnia, and to a lesser extent Croatia and Slovenia – are relatively well documented, while others, such as those in Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Albania, and Bulgaria, have received far less attention. This unevenness also extends through time and within individual countries. To some extent, the disparity in the literature mirrors the uneven distribution of refugees and migrants across countries and camps along the Route and over time. At the time of writing, Greece – and to a lesser extent Bosnia and Serbia – hosts significantly larger numbers of people-on-the-move and more extensive accommodation systems, where people also tend to stay longer, compared to countries like Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, or Montenegro. While this discrepancy is reflected in both the academic and grey literature, it does not fully account for the unevenness in the available research.

One potential cause of unevenness in the literature is the influence of media attention, which tends to focus on the most visible forms of deprivation and direct violence. This attention drives the work of volunteers and activists (including the production of reports and other grey literature), as well as scholarly research. Certain sites with deplorable conditions have received drastically more media coverage, often sensationalized, while other parts of the Route have become increasingly invisibilized in recent years (Hameršak et al., 2020). Despite reports of violence and deprivation, some sites – such as camps in Bulgaria or Albania – remain challenging for activists, journalists, and researchers to access. At times, international activists and volunteers have gravitated toward areas highlighted in the media (Rydzewski, 2024). Conversely, activist groups have also played a role in bringing overlooked issues along the Route into the media spotlight (ex: Tondo, 2020; Tondo & Hawkins, 2024). Importantly, activism and research on the Route are closely intertwined, as volunteering and activism have often provided migration researchers with key entry points for exploring various aspects of the corridor, including camps (Cantat, 2020; Hameršak, 2021; Hameršak & Pleše, 2017; Helms, 2023; Kogovšek Šalamon & Bajt, 2016). This has been particularly

⁷ I complemented my review of this literature by engaging in conversations with the other members of TheGAME research team to draw on their observations and knowledge of camps and literature in various countries.

true of graduate-level ethnographic research (Bellini, 2023; Jordan & Moser, 2020; Lazarova, 2016; Petričević, 2022; Raimondi, 2019; Rydzewski, 2023). Nevertheless, these patterns are also insufficient to explain the disparities in the grey and academic literature both between and within countries.

While over-reliance on English-language sources is a shortcoming, the dearth of English-language literature on migration in several countries may reflect a corresponding lack of local language sources. Whether a given area has a history of academic research on extra-regional (forced) migration seems to shape research agendas in universities across the region (Bielenin-Lenczowska, 2024; Otova & Staykova, 2019). For example, the information on camps in Macedonia is primarily documented in grey literature, with some exceptions, and is largely focused on the 2015–2016 period with minimal information published in the years since; apart from an MA thesis on Vinogjug (Lazarova, 2016), there is very little research on camps or international migration in/through Macedonia (Bielenin-Lenczowska, 2024).

Comparatively, to my knowledge, there is even less literature on current ‘Balkan Route’ camps and migration in Montenegro, Kosovo, and Albania. In all three contexts, the existing English-language academic literature on migration and camps focuses primarily on refugees, displaced people, emigration, and return migration associated with the wars of the 1990s (e.g., Elbasani & Šabić, 2020; King & Christou, 2011; King & Oruc, 2019). When these states are referenced in academic research on the Route, it is often in passing (as countries from, to, or through which refugees and migrants are moving) in the context of research largely focused on other countries in the region. Hence, I mainly draw here from the scant grey literature available – although it prioritizes policy- and practice-related concerns, such as reporting monthly statistics or documenting conditions in camps. In some cases, particularly regarding Kosovo and Albania, the literature is so incomplete that it can be challenging even to establish how many camps were operating during certain time periods. For example, one International Organization for Migration (IOM) report from 2016 mentions ‘Amiko’ camp at Gjakova as one of two then-functioning camps. However, I was unable to find any further reference to this camp (IOM, 2016a: 37). It is unclear how long it remained open, in what capacity, or indeed whether it ever operated at all. It seems that – in addition to the factors already outlined – the paucity of literature may also be related to the relative invisibilization of migrant issues within countries, in light of migration policing strategies and the criminalized, clandestine nature of the Route(s) in some contexts. Furthermore, some formally operating camps may habitually host extremely modest numbers of migrants and thus be deemed less important to research.

In addition to spatial unevenness within and between countries, there is also a temporal unevenness in the literature on camps along the Balkan Route. Generally, greater attention is paid to ‘emergency’ periods. For both Slovenia

and Croatia, for example, there is more research available on the 2015–2016 period, including ethnographic research on transit camps by volunteer/activist-academics, published by research institutes in both countries (Bužinkić & Hameršak, 2018; Kogovšek Šalamon & Bajt, 2016). A different sort of temporal unevenness in camp research pertains to the speed at which migrants are able or unable to move through countries. Typically, more research is conducted in places where people-on-the-move are slowed down (or get stuck) and thus have more opportunity to participate in research – such as in Greece, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina – than in places where they usually move on quickly, and may attempt to remain invisible to authorities (and thus also to researchers) – such as in Albania, Macedonia, Kosovo, and Montenegro. In this way, the migration management and bordering that shape migrant im/mobilities and in/visibilities also shape research.

Indeed, the very conjunctures of space-time and power that establish and maintain camps and make them of interest to political geographers and other researchers also crucially affect ‘camp methodologies’, influencing how research may or may not be conducted (Weima & Brankamp, 2022). Research in formal camps often depends on permissions from state actors, humanitarian organizations, or both, limiting how, when, and even whether researchers can access these spaces (Brankamp, 2019; Minca, 2022; Neto, 2019; Weima, 2022). Research within TheGAME project highlights significantly varied access to camps and organizations managing or working within them across the Route. Broader shifts in camp management, such as securitization and the physical distancing of camps from urban areas, further complicate access for media, volunteers, and academics. Consequently, research on camps may be constrained and necessitate creative methodologies, such as conducting interviews with camp residents outside camp boundaries. These methods, however, pose their own challenges, particularly when camp residents face severe restrictions on their rights and mobility.

The unevenness of the camp literature along the Balkan Route also reflects the dual nature of camps. At times, they are places of intense visibility, where ‘populations’ are in some ways captive and thus overly accessible to state management, humanitarian intervention, and researchers (Carter-White & Minca, 2025; Hyndman, 2001; Omata, 2021; Pascucci, 2017; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2013). Conversely, camps can also be intentionally rendered inaccessible to those not subjected to encampment (Maillet et al., 2017), resulting in entire networks of camps along the Route being ‘invisibilized’, particularly along the ‘southern Balkan’ corridor.

PRE-EXISTING MIGRATION INFRASTRUCTURES: DETENTION AND ASYLUM CENTRES ALONG THE BALKAN ROUTE

Refugee camps are far from a new presence in Europe, including the Balkans. In 2015, several countries in the Balkans were still hosting people displaced by wars related to the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, and some sites used as camps had prior and even overlapping histories of sheltering people experiencing displacement. Several of these prior centres served as the base infrastructure for current asylum and refugee centres – some of which were later renovated explicitly to meet ‘European standards’.

Concerns among European policymakers about migration to Western Europe via ‘the Balkan Route’ originated decades before 2015 (Hess & Kasperek, 2021). These concerns were closely tied to efforts to ‘Europeanize’ migration and asylum policies and infrastructure, particularly through European Union (EU) pre-accession or accession processes (see Chapter 3, this volume). Accordingly, by 2015, all the countries discussed in this chapter had pre-existing asylum and detention infrastructure. The limited literature on these centres highlights their construction or renovation to align with European asylum standards, funded by the EU either directly through governments or via UN agencies. For example, in Serbia, Banja Koviljaca Asylum Centre (AC) had functioned as an asylum centre since the 1960s, hosting people displaced by regional wars between 1995 and 2005. It was reconstructed in 2008 to meet EU requirements under the guidance of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) with EU funding (Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, 2020). Similarly, in Montenegro, the opening of the Spuž Asylum Centre/Foreigners’ Centre in 2014 was designed ‘to fulfil the obligations from international treaties and obligations of the Action Plan [...] in the process of the EU accession’ (Portal Analitika, 2015). When asylum infrastructure is conceptualized as ‘camps’, as argued by Kreichauf (2018) and others, EU funding for camp infrastructure or the ‘campization’ of the region predates 2015. However, the process has become more visible since 2015 with the proliferation of camps and the development of transit-oriented infrastructure.

In 2015, when the number of people-on-the-move in the region greatly increased, in many countries, the existing asylum infrastructure – and in several cases the migration detention infrastructure – was initially designated as accommodation. However, the capacities of this infrastructure were quickly exceeded and proved vastly inadequate for the number of people moving within the corridor. Furthermore, the locations of some (though not all) asylum centres were misaligned with the actual and desired trajectories of most migrants, being situated far from the routes most travelled and from the

sites where accommodation was most needed. In many ways, Serbia stands out as an exception to this pattern. While its existing asylum infrastructure was initially overwhelmed, it was subsequently largely supplemented, rather than sidelined, by additional formal camps, both responding to and seeking to shape the evolving routes in different ways in different periods (see Minca et al., 2018, 2019; also, Chapter 5, this volume).

In 2015, the existing asylum and detention infrastructure in Macedonia, Croatia, and Slovenia was designated as emergency accommodation as part of the refugee response (Beznec et al., 2016; Coleridge, 2013; Petričević, 2022; UNHCR Macedonia, 2013). However, by spring 2015 in Macedonia, and by September 2015 in Croatia and Slovenia, the demand for accommodation far exceeded the capacities of this infrastructure, which was theoretically designed for asylum claimants seeking to remain in each country rather than for people aiming to move onwards. For example, in Macedonia, the primary pre-existing infrastructure for people-on-the-move consisted of a detention centre and an asylum centre in Skopje, opened in 2007 and 2008 respectively (Coleridge, 2013; Global Detention Project [GDP], 2017). Conditions in the detention centre, in particular, quickly became overcrowded and inhumane (Amnesty International, 2015; Beznec et al., 2016; GDP, 2017; Macedonia Helsinki Committee, 2015). By late summer 2015, both centres were largely sidelined as new transit camps were established.

In Croatia and Slovenia, the existing asylum and detention infrastructure was briefly incorporated into the initial response to increased refugee arrivals. In mid-September 2015, after Hungary closed its border with Serbia to migrants, thousands began travelling through Croatia and Slovenia. For approximately six days, Croatia's initial response was to transport people to existing asylum and detention centres – then broadly referred to as 'reception centres' – including Ježevó Detention Centre, and the asylum centres in Zagreb and Krilj, before onward transportation to the still-closed Slovenian border (Grubiša, 2018). Similarly, Slovenia's initial plan relied on its existing Vič asylum home (comprising one main facility and two branch facilities) and existing detention infrastructure (UNHCR, 2015), supplemented by several additional 'accommodation centres' across the country. However, this approach was abandoned after just three days, as the sheer number of arrivals overwhelmed the capacity of these facilities (Kogovšek Šalamon & Bajt, 2016; Ladić & Vučko, 2016). Consequently, in Croatia, Slovenia, and Macedonia, pre-existing asylum infrastructure was quickly sidelined in favour of transit camps and other explicitly temporary shelters until March 2016, as will be discussed further below.

In Albania and Montenegro, existing asylum centres were used as transit infrastructure along the Route for longer periods, although they accommodated far fewer migrants than those passing through Croatia, Slovenia, and

Macedonia. From 2017–2018 onward, changes such as increased border and migration policing in other countries reshaped the corridor, leading more migrants to attempt passage through Albania and Montenegro instead of Macedonia. Consequently, asylum centres in Montenegro and Albania faced growing pressure. In Albania, the ‘National Reception Centre for Asylum Seekers’ in Tirana had been operational since approximately 2007, with a capacity of 180 residents (Vathi & Zajmi, 2017). While this capacity was largely sufficient in its early years, it became inadequate from around 2017 onwards as arrivals increased (Ibid.). In Montenegro, the Asylum Centre at Spuž had a capacity of only eighty places, which was frequently exceeded in 2017–2018. Adjacent to this centre was a closed detention centre that was reportedly used to accommodate asylum seekers at times when the asylum centre was full (Ahmetašević & Bošković, 2018; IFRC, 2018). By late 2017, the sole asylum centre could no longer accommodate arrivals, prompting the Government of Montenegro to rent additional accommodation for single men at a motel ‘facility’ in Konik, Podgorica. This facility hosted an average of 128 people daily, but reports highlighted many shortcomings in conditions there (UNHCR ACSR, 2019; UNHCR Montenegro, 2019: 7–8). In 2018, UNHCR expanded the official capacity of Spuž AC by donating four ‘Refugee Housing Units’, which added twenty-four beds (six per container ‘unit’), along with two further containers adapted for sanitation purposes (UNHCR Montenegro, 2019: 8). Both the Montenegrin and Albanian asylum centres, as well as the asylum centre in Kosovo, faced significant strain during the Covid-19 pandemic when border closures left many migrants ‘stuck’ (Caritas, 2020; Karaj, 2020; La Cimade, 2023). For example, Kosovo’s Centre for Asylum Seekers in Magurë became overcrowded, exceeding its official capacity of 100 people (Avdimetaj et al., 2020; Bytyqi, 2021; European Union Agency for Asylum, 2022: 17; Vathi & Zajmi, 2017).

Bosnia and Herzegovina experienced a significant increase in the number of people-on-the-move arriving from late 2017 onwards. Prior contingency planning had designated the pre-existing Delijaš Asylum Centre and Salakovac Refugee Reception Centre as key accommodation sites (UNHCR, 2016). However, their combined capacity of a few hundred people fell far short of the thousands requiring accommodation in the country in 2018 (United Nations Country Team Bosnia and Herzegovina [UNCT BiH], 2019; see also Chapter 6, this volume). In practice, Delijaš AC was underutilized, as officials maintained the requirement to formally register an asylum claim in Bosnia in order to access the centre, even as the processing of these claims was overwhelmed. Additionally, its remote location was often undesirable to people-on-the-move (Ahmetašević & Mlinarević, 2019; Nives et al., 2018; Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020). Similarly, the pre-existing Refugee Reception Centre Salakovac near Mostar, included in prior contingency plans, only began

accommodating arriving migrants in May 2018. At that time, the Council of Ministers and relevant ministries introduced a legal framework allowing ‘people with intention to seek asylum’ – not just those with recognized refugee or subsidiary protection status – to stay at the centre. Over 200 people were subsequently transferred to the Salakovac camp following the eviction of a makeshift encampment in central Sarajevo (Nives et al., 2018). In subsequent years, as additional transit camps were established in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Asylum Centre Delijaš rarely reached capacity, and Salakovac largely reverted to serving the small number of people with formally recognized refugee or subsidiary protection status.

To varying degrees and at different times, open asylum centres – though formally designated for asylum claimants – have functioned in nearly every country along the Route as transit camps under another name for people-on-the-move. This transit role has typically been concentrated during contingency periods but, in some cases, persisted for years. This situation has even been reflected in humanitarian reports; for example, an International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) map labelled Spuž Asylum Centre in Montenegro as a ‘transit camp’ (IFRC, 2018). While asylum centres accommodate a smaller portion of people who remain for longer periods in a country to formally seek asylum there – despite limited support for integration (see Ahmetašević & Mlinarević, 2019; Petričević, 2022) – most have primarily served as places for people-on-the-move to ‘rest’ before continuing their journeys. For example, many residents of the asylum centre at Vič in Ljubljana described it as a place to recover after enduring pushbacks and harsh conditions (Boitiaux, 2019), a framing echoed by residents of Porin Centre in Zagreb (Petričević, 2022: 171). In Kosovo, in 2020, the Centre for Asylum Seekers in Magurë hosted migrants for an average of three weeks (Jashari, 2020). Albania’s asylum centre in Tirana, located closer to borders with Montenegro and Kosovo – the desired next stage for most migrants – played an even stronger role in facilitating onward mobility. Nearly all individuals who expressed the intention to seek asylum there left within a few days (Group of Experts on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings [GRETA], 2020; La Cimade, 2023). In Macedonia, in 2018, those requesting asylum were transferred to the country’s asylum centre, with migrants using this procedure as a pathway to exit the then-closed southern camp, secure transportation to Skopje, and ultimately move onwards with their journeys (Amet, 2019: 13). The authorities framed this as ‘abuse’ of the system, responding by slowing asylum processing times and transfers to the asylum centre (Ibid.; w2eu.info, 2023). The use of asylum centres as temporary resting sites highlights their role in ‘the making of the Route’. This role depends on legal frameworks,

actual practices enabling or restricting access,⁸ and the availability of other open transit camp infrastructure.

Only in Slovenia and Croatia – the two EU countries examined in this analysis – does asylum infrastructure appear to have regained a more substantive role within the Route. Following the closure of borders and transit centres in both countries in spring 2016, asylum centres once again became the primary formal camp infrastructure. Many migrants who were ‘stuck’ in transit centres at the time were eventually transferred to these formal camps. For example, in March 2016, Asylum Centre Vič was initially over capacity, with over 230 of about 400 ‘stranded migrants’ accommodated at the centre (IOM, 2016b). Until recently, neither of these countries had re-opened any form of temporary reception centre or camp. At the time of writing, there is almost no information available on the camp opened in Dugi Dol (Croatia) in 2024.

TRANSIT CAMPIZATION

The inadequacies of the asylum infrastructure in most countries along the Route became evident when the number of people-on-the-move greatly increased in 2015. Similar challenges emerged in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Albania by 2017–2018. Taken together, these deficiencies led to the establishment of various forms of explicitly temporary accommodation, such as ‘transit camps’ and ‘temporary reception centres’, which I collectively refer to as ‘transit camps’ throughout this chapter. Despite their significance, transit camps remain underexamined in camp studies research, leaving many questions unanswered about the management of (im)mobility, the interplay of care and control, and governance and lived experiences within these spaces.

Transit camps along the Balkan Route have been established within a diverse array of pre-existing infrastructures, including abandoned factories, disused hotels, and decommissioned barracks. However, container infrastructure has emerged as the dominant choice. ‘Transit campization’ has also been a process of ‘containerization’. Shipping containers, flat-pack ‘units’, and other forms of ‘mobile infrastructure’ have become ubiquitous in refugee and migrant accommodation globally; and, over the past decade, they have also become the primary infrastructural response along the Balkan Route. Hanna Baumann (2022) has analysed the characteristics of shipping containers, suggesting that they speak to the distinct spatio-temporal dynamics of contemporary migration management: ‘As refugee shelter, the shipping container’s dual qualities

⁸ Including whether data from these centres is shared with European countries in ways that could be detrimental to later asylum claims, and how this practice has changed over time in each country.

(mobile/durable, temporary/stable) make it an interstitial form of housing, both spatially and temporally' (Baumann, 2022: 24); they facilitate 'the movement and redistribution of people across space' (Ibid.). Containers are inherently temporary structures, neither designed for permanence nor conducive to comfortable long-term habitation. As noted earlier, shipping containers and similar mobile 'units' are now a ubiquitous feature of the camp systems in every country along the Route. In many sites with pre-existing infrastructure, containers have been added to expand accommodation capacity, provide toilets and showers, or as space for additional services. They have also been employed to adapt spaces originally not intended for human habitation, such as factories or warehouses. Furthermore, nearly all new transit camps and temporary reception facilities set up over the past five years have relied primarily on container infrastructure, signalling a clear trend in migration management infrastructure along the Route.

This diverse infrastructure reflects the ad hoc nature of much of the initial – and ongoing – humanitarian response to migration in the region. Dunn (2017) identifies 'adhocracy' as a hallmark of humanitarian responses to displacement. Despite a performance of planning and coordination, settlements are often 'rapidly cobbled together', leaving displaced people to navigate confusing systems and endure inadequate conditions (Ibid.: 85), particularly in the early stages. Over time, however, there is often an apparent 'normalization' of encampment, as systems that were initially 'ad hoc' go on to develop routines and regularity and more standardized infrastructure is put in place. This process of 'formalization' (Kurnik & Razsa, 2020) can improve shelter conditions compared to the initial response, yet governance in many cases remains improvised. This suggests that rather than a strict binary between 'ad hoc' and 'formalized' campization, there may exist a continuum – or even a symbiosis – between these two states.

Transit camps, while often driving or, minimally, tolerating onward mobility, also serve to securitize, enclave and invisibilize migrants within the corridor. When few or no alternative safe and affordable accommodation options are made available, these camps effectively contain and isolate migrants from the broader population in each country – even when they are technically 'open'. Drawing on research in the Italian context of Ventimiglia, Tazzioli notes that 'the designation "transit camp"' reflects both migrants' desires to move on, and the authorities' attitude of 'not-looking and not-controlling too much', so as not to keep migrants in the country (Tazzioli, 2023: 129). This dynamic seems to be echoed in some (though not all) transit infrastructure systems along the Balkan Route, where camps provide a space for rest before onward journeys while simultaneously keeping migrants 'out of public sight' (Ibid.). As Tazzioli describes the (now-closed) transit camp in Ventimiglia, it exemplified 'to some extent an example of humanitarian control; indeed, it functioned, at

once, as a space to filter, identify and monitor migrants in transit and as a temporary shelter for them' (Ibid.). In contexts where there is greater control over (im)mobility, some transit camps function as what Turner and Whyte (2022) define as 'carceral junctions' – spaces that contain and control people while simultaneously facilitating, and at times necessitating, their continued mobility. These transit camps emulate the contradictions of custodial care and control that scholars have identified as central to the functioning of refugee camps globally (Brankamp, 2019; Collins et al., 2022; Hyndman, 2018; Turner, 2016). This duality is evident in the transit camps along the Balkan Route, though the temporalities of transit in this context differ significantly from those explored in much of the existing refugee camp literature (Carter-White & Minca, 2025).

Transit camps along the Route have operated in varied ways over time and across different countries, both shaping and being shaped by shifting patterns of mobility. While camps are never intended to be permanent, the particular 'imposition of temporariness' (Papoutsis, 2021: 2) in transit camps – coupled with many residents' own desire to move on quickly – sets them apart from other refugee camps. However, these temporalities are far from uniform. The experiences of 'transit' and 'temporariness' range widely: from rapid transit junctions where people spent mere hours before continuing their onward journeys in 2015–2016, to sites where migrants find themselves stuck or stranded for months or even years. Furthermore, transit does not always facilitate journeys in a straightforward, linear trajectory – indeed, for many, routes through the region are more circulatory (Bendixsen, 2023; Mandić, 2021; Rydzewski, 2023; Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020). Nevertheless, I group all these infrastructures under the umbrella of transit camps, viewing them as illustrative of a specific spatio-temporal technique of migration governance along the Route. However, due to the limited literature on some of the camps, we cannot assume that all similarly labelled camps operate in an equivalent way – particularly those in Albania – until further research is conducted.

Macedonia, Croatia, and Slovenia: Temporary, Invisibilized Camp Junctions

The transit camps established in 2015 in Macedonia, Croatia, and Slovenia may serve as examples of transit camps functioning as 'carceral junctions'. In all three countries, as initial plans relying on existing infrastructure proved insufficient, transit camps were rapidly set up near key border 'entry' points, and in the cases of Macedonia and Slovenia, also at the border 'exit' points (Bezнец et al., 2016; Kogovšek Šalamon & Bajt, 2016: 8; Zorko, 2018). In Macedonia, a newly established crisis management centre (CMC), in collaboration with UNHCR, other United Nations (UN) agencies, and non-governmental organizations, opened two transit camps in August 2015 (Abikova &

Piotrowicz, 2021; Beznec et al., 2016; Bužinkić & Hameršak, 2018; Lazarova, 2016). In the south, the transit centre in Gevgelija is located just a couple of hundred metres from the Greek border, while in the north, the transit centre in Tabanovce lies about 200 metres from the Serbian border (UNHCR, 2016). In Croatia, the Opatovac Temporary Reception Centre was established in September 2015, about twenty kilometres from the border with Serbia, with a potential capacity of up to 5,000 people (Grubiša, 2018: 65). Two months later, it was replaced by the Winter Reception and Transit Centre at Slavonski Brod (Hameršak & Pleše, 2017). In Slovenia, following the initial border closures in September 2015, several new camps were set up to facilitate the movement of migrants from the Croatian border to the Austrian border (Zorn, 2016: 122). By November, the system had been 'streamlined' to a single 'entry' registration and transit camp in Dubova, from which migrants were transported to one of two 'exit points' on the border with Austria: Šentilj, or alternatively, Jesenice (IOM, 2016b; UNHCR, 2016).

In all three countries, the transit camps were established at locations outside towns or in industrial areas, often adjacent to or near railway lines to facilitate rapidly organized onward transportation or independent mobility (Abikova & Piotrowicz, 2021; Hameršak et al., 2020; Rydzewski, 2023; Zorko, 2018). As noted by Beznec et al. (2016: 18), 'on the one hand, this meant that the transport of refugees took place more quickly and efficiently, but on the other hand it also meant that refugees became more isolated and their travels more tightly controlled'. Hence, these camps largely invisibilized the accommodation and movement of migrants within each country during this phase of the humanitarian emergency (Kogovšek Šalamon & Bajt, 2016; Zorko, 2018). While initially described as 'chaotic and inhumane', conditions in the camps improved over time – though not always consistently (Ladić & Vučko, 2016: 20).

In Croatia and Macedonia, the transit camps became 'closed' sites in spring 2016 following a further spate of border closures to irregularized migrants across the Route. This translated into the temporary detention of those who were staying at these camps at the time (Hameršak & Pleše, 2017). For example, an estimated 1,600 people were 'stranded' in Macedonia (Beznec et al., 2016; UNICEF & UNHCR, 2016). Although still referred to as 'transit centres', these camps temporarily became 'closed' camps, and those stranded there were officially prohibited from leaving in the initial period (Lazarova, 2016: 93). Both the Gevgelija and Tabanovce camps had been designed for short-term transit and lacked adequate facilities to host people for extended periods (GDP, 2017: 12; UNICEF & UNHCR, 2016). While the required infrastructure for longer-term accommodation was eventually added, after some weeks of confinement, the northern camp formally became an 'open' site once more. At both camps, the number of registered residents gradually declined over time (Beznec et al., 2016; EWB Archives, 2016). While the transit camps

in Slovenia and Croatia ultimately closed entirely,⁹ the camps in Macedonia still remain operational, retaining the ‘transit’ designation in name, although their roles appear to have transformed significantly in practice.

Reports indicate that, from the summer of 2016 to 2018, migrants arriving in Macedonia were often denied formal registration and access to camps. Many also may have sought to avoid the camp system entirely – particularly the Gevgelija camp, which was reportedly used for irregular returns to Greece (Davidovska & Redjepi, 2018; GDP, 2017; Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, 2018; Lazarova, 2016). Since 2018, little further research has been conducted to provide insight into their more recent functioning and governance.¹⁰ In any case, the number of people officially registered at the Macedonian camps has remained extremely low in the intervening years (Amet, 2019; w2eu.info, 2023; ZIP Institute, 2017).

Montenegro, Albania, and Kosovo

Currently, there is a significant gap in the literature concerning the transit camps opened by IOM since 2017 in Montenegro, Kosovo, and Albania with European funding. As in the case of Macedonia, the very low numbers of people registered at some of these centres may suggest that their governance differs from that of other transit centres in the region – particularly those in Albania. However, this remains a subject requiring further research, given the dearth of available public information.

In Montenegro, the Božaj Transit Camp – located near the border with Albania on the northern shore of Lake Skadar – opened in 2020. The establishment of the camp was jointly funded by EU integration funds (pre-accession assistance) and the Government of Montenegro (Balkan News, 2020). At its inauguration, the Montenegrin Minister of Internal Affairs described the camp as ‘the best way to affirm Montenegro’s European perspectives, based on the successful application of best practices in the field of integrated migration and asylum management’ (Balkan News, 2020). In Kosovo, a temporary reception centre was opened in November 2021, within a refurbished former military building (European Commission, 2020: 54; European Union Agency for Asylum, 2022). The renovation was completed with EU and IOM support as part of migration management efforts during the Covid-19 pandemic (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2022; Qerimi, 2021). In addition to providing temporary accommodation, the centre is also charged with collecting

⁹ I have not found any information about the afterlives of these sites.

¹⁰ As part of TheGAME project, research on migration in Macedonia is currently being conducted by Viki Mladenova.

data on migration (Qerimi, 2021). However, in its first year, only a few hundred people were registered there (IOM Kosovo, 2023).

In Albania, over the past eight years, various forms of temporary accommodation have been used at or near the southern border with Greece, becoming more formalized in recent years. Initially, in 2017, Kakavija was a primary site for people-on-the-move crossing the border. This site, along with other southern border crossing posts, lacked facilities and had only inadequate waiting rooms for people arrested in transit and undergoing mandatory screening (Albanian Helsinki Committee, 2018: 16). As an ad hoc response, Caritas provided accommodation in hotels and at a temporary reception centre in Gjirokastra, which was 'rehabilitated' with support from UNHCR (Albanian Helsinki Committee, 2018; La Cimade, 2023). However, since 2017, three 'registration and temporary accommodation centres' have been established: in Gerhot, Gjirokastra (2017), at the Kapshtica Border Crossing Point (2019), and in Qafë Botë (2023) (IOM Albania, 2017, 2022, 2023). All three centres were set up by IOM, drawing on various sources of European funding.

The registration and temporary accommodation centres (RTACs) opened in Albania, as well as the Božaj Transit Camp in Montenegro, are container-based camps, with initial capacities of approximately sixty people, following similar layouts. For example, the RTAC in Gerhot, Gjirokastra comprises '15 fully equipped units' (containers). Of these, ten are designated for accommodation, two are 'sanitary blocks', two serve as bathrooms, and one is used for administration, including registration (IOM Albania, 2017). The containers are mobile and designed 'to be moved to other areas in case of alterations in the dynamics of foreigners/asylum seekers in RoA [Republic of Albania]' (Albanian Helsinki Committee, 2018: 17). The RTAC at Kapshtica follows a similar layout, with the addition of two 'units' designated as a kitchen and laundry, respectively (IOM Albania, 2019). In 2022, this facility was further expanded to include an additional fifty beds in newly added containers (IOM Albania, 2022). The reasons behind this shift to containerization and its outcomes have not been thoroughly examined in the existing literature. Similarly, the effects of containerized living on the lives of residents still need to be analysed. Although these sites are technically temporary, their role in managing the mobility of refugees and migrants along the Balkan Route warrants critical scrutiny and further research.

According to a recent French civil society report, these centres detain individuals arrested 'in an irregular situation at the border' for 'pre-identification' prior to their transfer to either a reception centre or a detention centre (La Cimade, 2023: 7). Albanian border forces, in coordination with Frontex, are actively involved in the operation of these centres (Ibid.). Since 2021, reports have consistently shown significantly lower numbers of people in formal accommodation across Albania (IOM, 2021, 2023). Despite the increased

number of camps now in operation, there are far fewer people registered in any sort of migrant or asylum centre accommodation in comparison to earlier years. The La Cimade report (2023) further highlights that, while Albania's migration legislation has remained the same, the police have reportedly stopped accepting asylum claims. I hypothesize that there may be a correlation between the opening of transit centres and shifts in migration management practices, particularly the sidelining of asylum infrastructure (as described below). However, this connection is not explicitly addressed in the existing literature and requires further research.

A Shifting Transit Camp Archipelago Across the Route

The establishment of explicitly *transit/temporary* centres across Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro, combined with the continued operation of the centres in Macedonia and the temporary reception infrastructure in Bosnia and Serbia, represents a broader trend of 'transit campization' across the non-EU member states of the Balkan Route. As detailed in other chapters of this volume, Serbia and Bosnia have seen the emergence and closure of numerous camps over the past decade, forming a constantly shifting archipelago of primarily open facilities across the two countries. However, these ostensibly open camps can swiftly adopt more restrictive measures or transition to closed status – or close completely. In Serbia, for example, nearly twenty reception and transit centres (RTCs) were opened, most concentrated in border regions; while several have since ceased operations, some remain officially on 'stand-by' (see Chapter 5, this volume). In Bosnia, the ad hoc nature of migration management became starkly evident when the route through Bosnia and Herzegovina saw a surge in prominence in 2018. In response, a series of semi-formal and formal camps were rapidly established and then closed over the subsequent years. These sites utilized a diverse range of pre-existing structures, from open fields and disused factories to a dilapidated hotel, abandoned military barracks, and a crumbling dormitory. Over time, the closure of some camps and the opening of others facilitated the relocation of migrants away from urban centres or to their peripheries, significantly reducing migrant visibility in cities. Further, the camps' infrastructure grew less 'ad hoc' and correspondingly more 'formalized' and normalized (even as important aspects of governance remain reactive). This pattern has been particularly apparent in Una-Sana Canton (see the openings and closures detailed by Gentili et al. in Chapter 6, this volume). Meanwhile, the opening of two temporary reception centres in Sarajevo Canton – TRC Ušivak in 2018 and TRC Blažuj in 2019 – on the outskirts of the city, further exemplifies the trend towards 'transit campization' and 'contain-erization' along the Route. Both centres rely primarily on container housing, roughly pieced together with pre-existing barracks and other buildings.

CONCLUSION

The existing literature is inadequate for tracing even basic details about certain camps, let alone providing deeper insights into their management and functioning within the context of the Balkan Route. Even for sites that are better documented, only a small portion of research is attentive to the experiences of those subjected to encampment or host communities. In other words, the everyday realities of camps remain significantly underexplored. This gap is particularly pronounced in what TheGAME researchers refer to as ‘southern Balkan invisible spatialities’. Despite these challenges, some broad patterns in camp systems across the Route can be identified, including within these ‘invisibilized’ spaces. In some cases, these patterns appear to be tied to shifts in geopolitics and migration management, particularly changes in border enforcement and the resulting impact on the dynamics of the Route. However, the underlying reasons for many of these changes are not unpacked in the existing literature, suggesting many possible areas for further research.

Across the Balkans, the archipelago of formal camps has continuously shifted and evolved over the past decade. In the early phases of greatly increased arrivals and contingency planning, authorities initially relied on existing asylum centres – and at times, detention facilities – as accommodation for people travelling the Route. Although asylum centres were not originally intended to function as transit infrastructure and are generally excluded from analyses of camps due to their nomenclature, they have been repurposed for this role at various times and to various degrees in all of the countries examined in this chapter. While these centres are often described in the journalistic and academic literature as spaces where people-on-the-move can ‘rest’, authorities have tended to view such use of asylum centres as a form of ‘abuse’ of the asylum system, despite many offering limited support for integration. As more explicitly designated transit infrastructure has been established across the Route, the role of asylum centres in this context has diminished. However, there are notable exceptions. In Croatia and Slovenia – both EU member states – where transit camps were closed in 2016, asylum centres once again serve as the primary camp infrastructure. Serbia, meanwhile, has asylum and reception centres (see Chapter 5, this volume).

Bound up with these shifting patterns of asylum infrastructure use, I have traced what I term a ‘transit campization’ of the Balkan Route – a transition towards explicitly transit-focused or temporary reception infrastructure across all countries along the corridor, at least during certain periods. Similarly to the initial reliance on asylum infrastructure, this process has largely been ‘ad hoc’ in its early stages, adapting diverse pre-existing facilities. Over time, however, these camps have become increasingly ‘formalized’ and normalized. A key

consequence of this shift has been the growing isolation and invisibilization of people-on-the-move across the Route, given that transit camps have largely been set up far from urban centres or on their peripheries. While these camps are predominantly 'open', promoting or compelling onward mobility, they are also highly susceptible to geopolitical developments. Events such as border closures – as seen during the spring of 2016 and the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic – or localized 'security incidents' can result in abrupt transitions to 'closed' camps, where residents face sudden detention for indefinite periods of time (Collins et al., 2022; Hameršak & Pleše, 2017; Lazarova, 2016) or even complete closure of camps (see Chapters 5 and 6, this volume).

Interwoven with the phenomenon of 'transit campization' (and to a lesser extent the use of asylum infrastructure as transit infrastructure) is what might be termed a 'containerization' of camp infrastructure. The most recently established camps across the Balkan Route have predominantly been composed of containers. The choice of container infrastructure, which is itself mobile and not designed as long-term accommodation, appears to reflect the desired temporariness of these spaces, in keeping with broader state and humanitarian efforts to manage migration by keeping migrants on-the-move (Tazzioli, 2020). Thus, 'transit campization' emerges as a key spatio-temporal tool of migration governance across the Balkan Route. Transit camps securitize and enclave people-on-the-move while also facilitating aid. While largely remaining 'open', they 'prompt' or – in some cases compel – further mobility.

Given the limited research to date on the specificities of transit camps within migratory routes, there is substantial scope for further study of this crucial infrastructure – including attention to the diverse and diverging perspectives of those navigating the Balkan Route and those seeking to manage it. Such research will require methodological imagination, particularly at camps where formal access for researchers is restricted and where residents are most transient. One key area for further research is the interconnectedness of camps within this 'archipelago'. Many of the camps are linked with others, not only because migrants physically travel between them but also because people-on-the-move exchange knowledge about these sites via online and personal networks. These connections are not linear but often exhibit circularity. Equally, they are not static but dynamic – as migratory paths shift, camps open and close, and conditions within camps evolve. Nor are the interconnections between camps equal. Rather, some camps retain a relatively peripheral or 'minor' role within the corridor, while others serve as central hubs for the mobility of many (though not all) migrants. There are also cross-border ties between camps through mechanisms of 'migration management', including standardized governance frameworks, coordinated funding schemes, and shared donor priorities. These connections are reinforced through the exchange of expertise and 'best practices' among authorities, during conferences, training sessions, and

'learning trips'. Geopolitical dynamics at various scales further shape these interactions.

While all official camps along the Route function as mechanisms of state control over migration, they are also strategically used – whether by choice or necessity – by people-on-the-move. This raises critical research questions about what the process of 'transit campization' signifies for those who – however temporarily – inhabit these spaces. Finally, considering the notable gap in critical research on camps and migration, particularly in the southern Balkans, a further pressing challenge emerges: how can we counter-map camps that remain invisibilized? These questions, and those raised above, are at the core of my ongoing research as part of TheGAME ERC project.

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3. Externalising the Common European Asylum System? Enlargement, legal harmonisation, and capacity building along the Balkan Route

Lorenzo Vianelli

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, the Balkans returned to the top of the European Union's (EU) political agenda in the wake of the so-called 'refugee crisis'. The European Agenda on Migration, introduced in May 2015, laid considerable emphasis on the external aspects of migration control and proposed several 'actions' of particular interest to the Balkans (European Commission, 2015a). These included: a partnership between the EU and the so-called 'transit countries' to contain irregular migration; the deployment of Frontex¹ in third countries to provide border support; and an increase in EU funding to third countries to strengthen their border management operations.

In September 2015, the European Commission (hereafter the Commission) announced a region-wide migration management support programme focused on identifying migrants, sharing information, and assisting migrant returns (European Commission, 2015b: 6). On 8 October 2015, EU institutions, together with the member states' ministers for home and foreign affairs and their counterparts from the Balkan countries, as well as from Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, jointly committed to supporting the 'transit countries' affected by the Balkan Route (Council of the European Union, 2015). Notably, the parties agreed to provide increased financial resources and to engage in technical cooperation with a view to delivering humanitarian assistance, enhancing reception capacity, and improving migrant registration and processing capabilities in the Balkans (Ibid.). A couple of weeks later, the governments of the

¹ Frontex is the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, and its mandate focuses on the control and management of the EU's external borders.

countries crossed by the Balkan Route² adopted a 17-point action plan that envisaged the permanent exchange of information, efforts to prevent ‘secondary movements’,³ an expansion in the reception capacity in the Balkans, the use of biometric data to enhance the registration of new arrivals, increased migrant returns in cooperation with Frontex (the European Border and Coast Guard Agency), and the reinforcement of border cooperation across the region (European Commission, 2015c).

All these meetings and plans resulted in a growing cooperation between the EU and the Balkan countries in the areas of migration, asylum, and border management. This heightened level of cooperation is even more operative today, as I set out to demonstrate in this chapter and as it has been further confirmed by the publication of the ‘EU Action Plan on the Western Balkans’ in December 2022. In this document, the Commission acknowledges the Balkan countries’ strategic role within the broader EU border regime, given their geographical position and their prospects of future EU membership (European Commission, 2022a). Accordingly, the main objective of this most recent plan is precisely to strengthen the partnership between the EU and Balkan countries with respect to migration control and asylum procedures.

The importance of the Balkans within the EU’s border politics has contributed to some extent to reinvigorating accession talks with countries that have already applied for EU membership, such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo,⁴ Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. The topics of borders, asylum, and migration have gained prominence within the negotiations, and the push for the introduction of EU-inspired laws, procedures, and expertise in the region has become evident. This chapter investigates the drive to introduce and standardise the EU’s legal norms, forms of knowledge, and organisational practices across the Balkan region, with a particular focus on asylum. Although the forms and impact of EU enlargement policies in the Balkans have been explored extensively in the academic literature (Bieber, 2012; Dzankić et al., 2019; Elbasani, 2013; Keil & Arkan, 2015; Kmezić, 2017; Noutcheva, 2012; Radeljic, 2013), to date few contributions have homed in on asylum (Beznec et al., 2016; Brsakoska-Bazerkoska, 2022; Kmezić et al., 2023;

² The countries represented at the meeting were Albania, Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and Slovenia.

³ In EU jargon, ‘secondary movements’ occur when migrants move from their first country of entry or country of resettlement within the EU to another EU member state.

⁴ This designation is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

Kogovšek Šalamon, 2016; Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020).⁵ Hence, this chapter intends to address, at least in part, this gap in the literature by critically investigating the discourses produced by EU actors about national asylum systems in the Balkans and their alignment with EU law and standards.

The chapter deliberately focuses on secondary sources such as institutional documents produced by EU actors within the process of enlargement. As such, it reflects the aim of this edited volume to offer an initial exploratory overview of some key topics studied in the context of the ERC project TheGAME. In a forthcoming essay, I will present a more conceptual analysis of the relevant debate, building upon the materials discussed here. More specifically, the sources taken into consideration in this chapter consist of two different sets of data. The first is drawn from the country reports produced by the Commission within the framework of accession talks with Balkan countries. These reports offer a key entry point for understanding the attempts made by the Commission to steer the reform of asylum systems in the region and their alignment with the EU *acquis*.⁶ The second data set consists of policy documents and reports on the work of the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA)⁷ in the Balkans. The chapter's exclusive focus on EU documents and perspectives is justified by my aim of shedding light on how actors such as the Commission and EUAA perceive and depict asylum systems in the Balkans. More specifically, by examining the documents published by these EU actors, I seek to uncover the discursive dimension of the enlargement process in the region as it concerns asylum in particular. Accordingly, I consider policy documents and reports produced at the EU level as tools that contribute to shaping a specific discourse about asylum systems in the Balkan countries.

⁵ A limited number of studies have examined the effects of EU enlargement policies on asylum systems in specific countries, such as Albania (Dosti et al., 2023) and Serbia (Djurović, 2024; Lehmann, 2023). Other studies – though dated – nonetheless offer an interesting outline of the early stages of the processes discussed in this chapter (Feijen, 2008; Peshkopia, 2005).

⁶ The EU *acquis* is the body of law, principles, and political objectives deriving from the treaties, the legislation, the declarations, the resolutions, the common measures, and the international agreements signed by the EU. The acceptance and the incorporation of the EU *acquis* into the national legal order is a condition for accession to the EU.

⁷ Since January 2022, the EUAA has officially replaced the former European Asylum Support Office (EASO), taking over the latter's tasks, activities, and operational plans. Both are discussed in additional detail in the section of this chapter entitled 'The involvement of the EUAA in the Balkans'. Please note that in this chapter, the labels EUAA, EASO, and the Agency are used interchangeably.

In the analysis presented hereafter, I set out to highlight two main points. The first concerns the importance of the enlargement process in shaping asylum systems in the region, that is to say, in gradually extending the Common European Asylum System (CEAS)⁸ beyond the territory of the EU. Enlargement is based on the *principle of conditionality* and therefore candidate countries are expected to enact reforms and adjust their administrative frameworks, including in the area of asylum, if they wish to move on in the accession process and receive further funding and support. The second point concerns the potential future implications of this externalisation of the CEAS. More specifically, by creating an outer space of allegedly safe third countries, or a '*cordon sanitaire*' to borrow the words of Henk Van Houtum (2010: 961), broadening the reach of the CEAS may afford the EU a measure of legal cover for more freely containing and returning migrants in this region. This strategy is in no way restricted to the field of asylum, where it entails an increase in reception capacity and the implementation of procedures that, at least on paper, are aligned with EU standards. It also involves more rigorous registration and identification of migrants, the alignment of visa policies to reduce unauthorised mobility towards the EU, and the signing of readmission agreements to facilitate the return of nationals and third-country nationals to Balkan countries.⁹

Before moving on to the next section, an important preliminary caveat is in order. Despite the efforts and funding mobilised by the EU, asylum systems in the Balkans remain severely constrained in terms of their workload capacity. Table 3.1 shows the number of asylum interviews conducted per year in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia from 2018 to 2023, while Table 3.2 illustrates the annual number of asylum decisions made in these countries over the same timeframe. In 2023, only 333 asylum interviews were conducted in total across these six countries, while the total number of asylum decisions was 1,310. These are key data

⁸ The CEAS is the legislative framework for asylum in the EU; its purpose is to establish common standards across EU member states to ensure that asylum seekers are treated equally throughout the EU. The CEAS consists of six legislative instruments: the Asylum Procedures Directive; the Reception Conditions Directive; the Qualification Directive; the Dublin Regulation; the Eurodac Regulation; and the regulation establishing the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA).

⁹ The EU has signed readmission agreements with Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia (European Commission, 2021b). These countries have also signed bilateral readmission agreements with several member states (see European Migration Network, 2022). Kosovo has no readmission agreement with the EU as a whole but has signed readmission agreements with 20 member states (European Commission, 2023d).

Table 3.1 *Aggregate number of asylum interviews per year (2018–2023) in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia*

Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Asylum interviews	382	415	295	293	306	333

Source: UNHCR, 2025.

Table 3.2 *Aggregate number of first instance asylum decisions per year (2018–2023) in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia*

Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Asylum decisions	5150	5587	3291	1562	1533	1310

Source: UNHCR, 2025.

points that need to be borne in mind when discussing the reform of asylum systems in the region.

Despite the limited number of asylum cases being processed, significant issues such as a lack of asylum case officers and long processing times are reported in several countries (Asylum Information Database [AIDA], 2023c; European Commission, 2023c, 2023d, 2023g). The situation of the reception systems is equally problematic, with reports of poor living conditions (AIDA, 2023b, 2023c; European Commission, 2023g), overcrowding (AIDA, 2023b, 2023c; European Commission, 2023b), and security issues (AIDA, 2023c). Most asylum seekers are contained in camps and large-scale facilities. There is little specialisation among these sites, meaning that vulnerable groups are rarely accommodated in dedicated facilities (AIDA, 2023a, 2023b; European Commission, 2023b). A lack of mechanisms for the identification of vulnerable persons is a further commonplace issue in the region (European Commission, 2023b, 2023d, 2023f, 2023h).

The next section briefly introduces the main features of the accession process and the state of the art of enlargement in the Balkans. The third section highlights the influence of the EU in shaping asylum systems in the region by focusing on the Commission’s assessment of national asylum systems. The

fourth section explores the capacity building,¹⁰ training, and legal support activities implemented by the EUAA in the Balkans.

ENLARGEMENT POLICY AND THE BALKANS

'The future of the Balkans is within the European Union' (European Commission, 2003). These words spelled out the potential for EU enlargement in the region during the EU-Western Balkans Summit held in Thessaloniki in 2003, just a few years after the devastating wars that tore apart the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Almost twenty years later, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, confirmed that 'the EU is more committed than ever to a common future, with our Western Balkans partners inside the EU' (European Commission, 2022b). Meanwhile, over the last two decades, the EU's expansion towards the southeast of Europe has been limited. Slovenia joined the EU in 2004, Bulgaria and Romania followed in 2007, and Croatia was the latest addition to the bloc in 2013. After full membership was granted to Bulgaria and Romania on 1 January 2025, all four countries became also part of the Schengen area.

The other countries in the region are at different stages of the accession process. Five of them (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia) have been granted candidate status, whereas Kosovo is a potential candidate country, meaning that it may eventually be granted candidate status if specific requirements are met. The status of candidate for membership does not necessarily imply that formal negotiations with the EU have been opened. For example, Bosnia and Herzegovina was granted candidate status in December 2022 and must now meet the so-called 'opening benchmarks' before accession talks can be launched, a step that requires unanimous approval from the European Council. For the other candidate countries in the Balkans, formal negotiations are currently ongoing (see Table 3.3).

The aim of the negotiation process is to prepare the candidate country for EU membership by encouraging it to adopt EU laws and enact judicial, administrative, economic, and other key reforms.¹¹ Key to the negotiations is the so-called 'Fundamentals' cluster, which concerns the rule of law, the functioning of democratic institutions, the organisation of public administration, and financial control. This cluster dominates both the initial and final stages of

¹⁰ The discourses and practices of capacity building deserve critical assessment in their own right, but this goes beyond the scope of this chapter. For a discussion of the risks and controversies surrounding this concept, see Edmunds and Juncos (2020).

¹¹ For further details on the accession process, see: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/steps-towards-joining_en

Table 3.3 *Enlargement and accession negotiations in the Balkans*

Country	Application for membership	Status	Start of negotiations
Albania	2009	Candidate country since 2014	2022
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2016	Candidate country since 2022	Not yet opened
Kosovo	2022	Potential candidate country since 2022	Not yet opened
Montenegro	2008	Candidate country since 2010	2012
North Macedonia	2004	Candidate country since 2005	2022
Serbia	2009	Candidate country since 2012	2014

Source: Author's elaboration based on multiple EU documents.

the negotiations and is therefore critical to the overall pace of the accession talks. It includes legislation on asylum, border management, and migration, revealing the crucial importance of these areas within the accession process. Indeed, along their pathway towards EU membership, candidate countries are required to harmonise their asylum laws with EU regulations and are expected to strengthen their administrative capabilities in this area, as further discussed in the next section.

In support of their efforts to comply with the EU *acquis*, candidate and potential candidate countries are given access to the 'Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance' (IPA), which was set up by the EU in 2007 via the allocation of EUR 11.5 billion over an initial multiannual framework (IPA I – 2007–2013). The second multiannual framework (IPA II) in 2014–2020 had a total budget of EUR 12.8 billion, whereas the allocation for the third multiannual framework (IPA III), which runs from 2021 to 2027, is over EUR 14.1 billion. Under IPA III, in the two-year period 2021–2022, the EU provided funding totalling EUR 201.7 million for initiatives related to migration and border management in the region (European Commission, 2022a). With respect to asylum, IPA III supports measures aimed at developing fair and efficient asylum procedures, ensuring access to asylum procedures and material reception conditions, developing registration procedures that are in line with the EU *acquis*, identifying vulnerable applicants and responding to their needs, digitising procedures, and developing integration programmes for beneficiaries of international protection (European Commission, 2021a: 17–18).

This is primarily done through the programme ‘EU Regional Support to Protection-sensitive Migration Management Systems in the Western Balkans – PHASE III’ (2022–2025), which is implemented by Frontex, the EUAA, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in partnership with representatives of the candidate countries.

THE INFLUENCE OF ACCESSION NEGOTIATIONS ON ASYLUM SYSTEMS IN THE BALKANS

In a recent publication on the relationship between EU integration and migration in the Balkans, political scientist Stefan Surlić observed that ‘Serbia’s asylum and migration policies cannot be taken out of the context of EU integration’ (2023: 90). Indeed, as this section will show, this observation might well be extended to the entire region. Clearly, the countries that are already EU member states – including Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Romania, and Slovenia – have had to harmonise their asylum systems with the CEAS. However, even in the other Balkan countries, there is evidence of a gradual alignment of national asylum systems with EU standards, given that this is a necessary step towards EU integration.

At the first stage of the accession negotiations, candidate countries undergo a so-called ‘screening process’ whereby the Commission assesses their readiness to adopt and implement the EU *acquis*. This assessment also covers laws, policies, and procedures in the field of asylum and border management. The screening process results in the identification of priorities for key reforms, which should then be implemented by candidate countries over the remainder of the negotiation phase. The progress made by candidate countries is monitored by the Commission via the publication of reports that represent a key source of information about the current degree of harmonisation of national laws with EU standards across multiple policy areas, including asylum. Examining these reports helps in understanding the main features of national asylum systems in the region, while also revealing the Commission’s assessment of these systems. Based on these documents, the rest of this section offers a brief overview of the main issues highlighted by the Commission for each national asylum system. Accordingly, it is divided into country-specific subsections.

Albania

In 2021, Albanian authorities adopted a new law on asylum that the Commission deems to be largely aligned with EU standards. The draft version of the law was reviewed by the Commission and the European Asylum

Support Office (EASO, 2020a), revealing once again the influence of the EU on asylum management in the region. Overall, the Commission now classifies the Albanian legal framework on asylum as ‘partially aligned with the EU *acquis*’ (European Commission, 2023a: 92), while calling for adjustments to definitions and procedures, more efficient implementation of asylum law, and further expansion of administrative capabilities. The Commission emphasises the need to enhance case assessment and to provide Albanian caseworkers with additional training in country of origin information (COI) and vulnerability (European Commission, 2023b). Further progress is also required with respect to the identification of applicants with specific protection needs and the provision of gender- and age-appropriate interpretation and reception accommodation (Ibid.). Finally, Albanian authorities are encouraged to prepare for sudden increases in asylum applications and to ensure regular data exchanges with the EU concerning asylum (European Commission, 2023a).

Bosnia and Herzegovina

At the time of writing, Bosnia and Herzegovina is expected to fulfil fourteen key priorities set by the Commission before formal accession negotiations may be opened (European Commission, 2019). One of these priorities concerns the establishment of a functioning asylum system and effective multi-level coordination in the field of border and migration management (European Commission, 2023c: 11). In the 2023 country report, the Commission acknowledges that some progress has been made in this respect, especially thanks to the adoption of the new ‘2021–2025 Strategy and Action Plan on Migration and Asylum’, the adoption in September 2023 of a new Law on Foreigners that establishes the principle of non-refoulement, and the implementation of the border management strategy for 2019–2023 (European Commission, 2023c: 7).

Nevertheless, the Commission points out several shortcomings in the national asylum system. First, it calls for greater harmonisation of national legislation with the most recent EU standards, especially concerning procedural safeguards during the asylum procedure (Ibid.: 58). Second, it emphasises the fact that national asylum authorities are significantly understaffed and underequipped, with the Asylum Unit within the Ministry of Security depending on external support, including that provided by the EU itself (Ibid.: 59). The Commission therefore invites national authorities to allocate an appropriate budget for migration management (Ibid.). Third, the Commission flags the fact that responsibility for reception is not equitably distributed across the country, given that most asylum seekers are accommodated in the Una-Sana and Sarajevo cantons (Ibid.: 57). Furthermore, asylum seekers are not guaranteed the same rights throughout the country because access to services

differs depending on where they are hosted (Ibid.: 59). For these reasons, the Commission calls for greater institutional cooperation and coordination between cantons and other levels of government as part of the gradual process of transferring responsibility for migration management to national authorities (Ibid.: 47–48).

Kosovo

Although Kosovo has only recently applied for EU membership and has not yet been granted candidate status, a considerable degree of harmonisation between its national legislation and EU asylum law is already in place. More specifically, the Commission holds that Kosovo's legal and institutional framework in the area of asylum is 'mostly in line with the EU *acquis*' (European Commission, 2023d: 55). This has also been confirmed by the EUAA, which recommends a shift in emphasis to the operationalisation of existing legislation (EUAA, 2022). Key forms of cooperation with the EU have also been implemented, including the liberalisation of visas for the citizens of Kosovo introduced on 1 January 2024 and the application of the 'EU Action Plan on Migration' presented by the Commission in December 2022.

Despite its overall positive assessment, the Commission identifies some room for improvement in the national asylum system. First, legislation could be further aligned with EU standards with respect to returns, the identification and referral of persons seeking protection, and the identification of persons with special needs (European Commission, 2023d: 55). A new Draft Law on Foreigners, currently under discussion, is expected to clarify current legal provisions with a view to further harmonising them with EU law. Second, the Commission highlights the need to build additional capacity via recruitment, the supply of biometric devices, improved data interoperability to aid in registration and the processing of asylum claims, and expanded interpretation services and legal support to enhance the quality of refugee status determination (Ibid.: 55). Third, the Commission reports that Kosovo's reception capacity is sufficient, especially since it was expanded in August 2023; nevertheless, it calls for improved services at reception centres and measures to enhance the safety of asylum seekers at these facilities (Ibid.: 53).

Montenegro

Montenegro is the candidate country with the longest experience of accession negotiations, which were initiated in 2012. The outcome of this lengthy exchange with EU institutions is that the Commission views Montenegro's legal framework on asylum as 'largely aligned with the EU *acquis*' (European Commission, 2023e: 64). No major issues concerning asylum are identified by

the Commission in its 2023 report, aside from a reception contingency plan to ensure better preparedness in the case of a sudden increase in asylum applications (Ibid.: 63). Another shortcoming of the national asylum system is the lack of a central biometric database for the registration of migrants and the collection of fingerprints. However, a plan for setting up a centralised digitalised identification system has been developed in conjunction with Frontex and will be funded through the IPA scheme (Ibid.: 63).

Montenegro is praised by the Commission for being the only candidate country in the Balkans that independently covers the running costs of its reception facilities in its national budget (Ibid.: 65). In 2023, additional state funding was allocated for the expansion of reception capacity (Ibid.: 64). Overall, the national asylum system is deemed to have benefited from the support of the EUAA, which enabled the establishment of a new COI unit, the training of caseworkers, and the definition of standard operating procedures (SOPs) for the systematisation and harmonisation of procedures (Ibid.: 64). In 2022, Montenegro joined the European Migration Network (EMN)¹² as an observer country, and a National Coordinator for its EMN National Contact Point was appointed in October of that year (Ibid.: 62).

North Macedonia

The screening of North Macedonia was launched in July 2022, immediately after the first Intergovernmental Conference on accession negotiations. The outcomes of the screening process were reported in July 2023, when the Commission stated that North Macedonia's legal framework for asylum is 'partially aligned with the EU *acquis*' (European Commission, 2023f: 88). The Commission recommended several amendments, concerning, for example, family reunification for beneficiaries of subsidiary protection and unaccompanied minors, the provision of information in detention facilities and at border crossings, labour market access for asylum seekers, alternatives to detention for irregular migrants, and access to services (Ibid.: 88–89). The Commission also observed that the lack of a personal identification number for asylum seekers is a major issue, given that it prevents applicants from accessing certain rights such as employment or opening a bank account (Ibid.: 51).

At a more practical level, the Commission claims that the implementation of asylum procedures 'is not fully aligned with the EU *acquis*' (European Commission, 2023g: 51). The key issues identified in this respect concern

¹² EMN is an EU network of migration and asylum experts whose task is to provide comparable and policy-relevant information and knowledge on asylum and migration in Europe.

the quality of refugee status determination, the length of asylum procedures, and the lack of interpretation services for applicants (European Commission, 2023f: 89–90). The Commission observes that national authorities have not provided enough funding, technical expertise, and staff to improve the asylum system (European Commission, 2023g: 51). With respect to reception, the overall capacity of the facilities is considered appropriate for the current needs of the country, but living conditions at these sites are poor and basic rights are not respected (Ibid.: 49). The Commission also calls for a contingency plan to be put in place for sudden increases in arrivals (European Commission, 2023f: 85). Finally, the Commission invites the national authorities to improve the treatment of applicants with special needs and unaccompanied minors, to systematically register migrants, and to develop a biometric database (Ibid.: 89–90).

Serbia

Serbia has been a candidate country since 2012 and accession negotiations were initiated in 2014. In its latest progress report, the Commission defines the national legal framework for asylum as ‘largely aligned with the EU *acquis*’ (European Commission, 2023h: 68). Further alignment could be achieved in relation to access to the asylum procedure, the structure of appeal bodies, the rights and obligations of asylum applicants, and safe third-country procedures (Ibid.: 68). In terms of implementation, the Commission calls for progress with respect to the length of asylum procedures; the quality of asylum decisions; the screening, identification, and protection of vulnerable applicants; and the quality of asylum adjudication (Ibid.: 67–68). Serbia has a functioning biometric database and a system for the automated identification of fingerprints, and it has adopted a roadmap to enable future interoperability with the Eurodac system (Ibid.: 69). Serbia has also been an observer country within the EMN since March 2023 (Ibid.).

In summary, this brief analysis of the Commission’s assessments of candidate and potential candidate countries shows how asylum systems along the Balkan Route are already characterised by some degree of harmonisation with EU standards. This is also the case in countries that are not EU members and thus where the provisions of the CEAS do not formally apply. Alignment with the EU *acquis* in the field of asylum, border, and migration management is a necessary step towards EU integration and is covered during the negotiations on the ‘Fundamentals’ cluster. For these reasons, legal frameworks, principles, procedures, and terminology relating to asylum in non-EU Balkan countries are relatively consistent with EU law, at least from a formal perspective.

THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE EUAA IN THE BALKANS

With the coming into effect of Regulation (EU) 2021/2303 in January 2022, the former European Asylum Support Office saw its mandate reinforced and it became a fully-fledged EU agency with a new title: the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA). This body plays a key role in the implementation of the CEAS and in the harmonisation of practices across the EU by providing technical support, operational assistance, and training to national asylum authorities. EUAA's support is often provided under the terms of operational plans that have been agreed with national authorities. Several member states in the Balkan region have benefited from this support in recent years, and cooperation plans are currently in place in Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, and Slovenia. However, the work of the EUAA is not restricted to the EU, as suggested by its External Cooperation Strategy (EUAA, 2023). A key pillar of this strategy concerns third-country support and specifically targets candidate and potential candidate countries in the Balkans by offering them legal guidance, technical assistance, capacity building services, and training. Thus, the EUAA explicitly seeks to strengthen asylum legislation and capacity in candidate and potential candidate countries, most of which are in the Balkans, to prepare them for their eventual integration into the CEAS.

Cooperation between the EUAA and candidate or potential candidate countries is organised via so-called 'Roadmaps for bilateral cooperation', which are mainly funded through the programme 'EU Regional Support to Protection-sensitive Migration Management Systems in the Western Balkans – PHASE III'. The first two roadmaps were signed by EASO with North Macedonia and Serbia, both covering the period 2017–2019. Since then, the roadmap approach has been replicated with Albania (2020–2022), Bosnia-Herzegovina (2020–2022), Kosovo (2022–2024), and Montenegro (2022–2023), while a second round of roadmaps has been agreed with both North Macedonia (2020–2022) and Serbia (2020–2022).

All these bilateral agreements are similarly structured. Their overall objective is to 'enhance the protection space for asylum seekers and refugees [...] in line with the CEAS and EU Member States' practices' (EASO, 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2020d; 2022; EUAA, 2022). In most cases, this general aim is further broken down into three more specific goals: 1) enhancing asylum-related legislation, institutions, and systems; 2) optimising asylum procedures; and 3) upgrading the reception system. According to official representations of this process, roadmaps are collaboratively developed by the EUAA and national authorities via the joint identification of areas of cooperation. Each roadmap document details the specific measures to be implemented, making it a valuable source of information on the EUAA's activities in that country.

The implementation of the roadmaps is monitored and evaluated by means of a mid-term review and a final overall assessment. This process results in an evaluation report that includes an updated needs assessment, which in turn serves as a basis for possible future cooperation. The preparation of the final evaluation reports has been outsourced to Ramboll Management Consulting, which in turn has appointed individual researchers for the drafting of each report. Evaluation is based on the analysis of secondary data, such as progress reports by the Commission and monitoring data by EUAA, combined with primary data collected through interviews with national authorities, international organisations, and EUAA staff. Reports concerning cooperation with Albania (Zulfiu-Alili, 2022a), Bosnia and Herzegovina (Šantić, 2022a), North Macedonia (Zulfiu-Alili, 2022a), and Serbia (Šantić, 2022b) have already been published and I now examine these as key sources on the work of EUAA in the region. Hence, the remainder of this section is also divided into country-specific subsections, allowing me to review the EUAA's activities on a country-by-country basis.

Albania

The 'Roadmap for Cooperation EASO-Albania (2020–2022)' concerns the three specific objectives mentioned above (EASO, 2020a). In pursuit of the first objective concerning the harmonisation of asylum law and institutions with the CEAS, the agency assisted in the preparation of secondary legislation, by-laws, and standard operating procedures (SOPs). With respect to the second objective on the development of effective asylum procedures, EUAA's support was focused on strengthening access to the procedure via the identification of people with special needs and on enhancing the quality of refugee status determination. The activities defined within the framework of the third objective concerned the improvement of reception conditions, with a specific focus on vulnerabilities. To this end, alongside training and the translation and dissemination of EUAA guidelines, the roadmap foresaw an assessment of reception conditions in the country, a feasibility study on the opening of a dedicated facility for unaccompanied minors/vulnerable people, and the roll-out of a contingency plan for a possible increase in asylum seekers.

The final external evaluation of the bilateral cooperation programme states that the roadmap was effective in terms of capacity building and the improvement of asylum legislation and procedures, whereas the results in the area of reception were limited (Zulfiu-Alili, 2022a: 4). According to the author of the evaluation report, the roadmap contributed to further aligning the asylum procedure with EU standards and to strengthening the Albanian authorities' processing capabilities, but the introduction of new asylum legislation has not been completed (Ibid.). Regarding reception, guidance was provided

by EUAA, but the planned assessment of reception conditions, the feasibility study, and the rollout of a contingency plan were not carried out (Ibid.: 13).

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The roadmap between EASO and Bosnia and Herzegovina set the same objectives as the roadmap between EASO and Albania (EASO, 2020b). In relation to the first objective on the strengthening and harmonisation of asylum legislation and institutions, EUAA assisted national authorities in reviewing the national asylum law and its accompanying by-laws in anticipation of a possible reform, in developing SOPs on registration and status determination, in strengthening institutional coordination, and in implementing screening procedures appropriate for vulnerable cases. With respect to the second objective on the strengthening of asylum procedures, the roadmap focused on improving the processing of claims by (unaccompanied) minors. The third objective on the strengthening of the reception system was pursued through the secondment of a senior expert to advise on possible revisions to national by-laws on reception, on the establishment of a reception centre for unaccompanied minors and vulnerable people, on the creation of SOPs for the management of reception facilities, and on the development of a contingency plan for reception.

The success of the roadmap between EUAA and Bosnia and Herzegovina was judged as modest by the author of the final evaluation report (Šantić, 2022a: 4). Only 25% of the planned activities were fully implemented, while 20% were partially implemented (Ibid.). The main shortfalls were identified in the area of reception, where most of the activities provided for under the agreement were not implemented. This was because the preliminary transfer of responsibility for the management of reception facilities from international organisations to national authorities did not take place (Ibid.: 4). Progress in relation to the strengthening of asylum procedures was also limited. The best results were obtained with respect to the harmonisation of laws and institutions: while the expected SOPs and workflows were not implemented, support was provided for the revision of the asylum law and related legislation (Ibid.: 11).

Montenegro

Moving on to the case of Montenegro, the needs assessment carried out in preparation of the roadmap showed a 'high degree of alignment' (EASO, 2022: 5) of the national legal framework with the CEAS. For this reason, the roadmap only envisaged two main objectives, instead of three as in the other countries examined. The first objective concerned the development of effective asylum procedures in line with the CEAS, whereas the second objective

was the creation of an effective reception system. The first objective was further broken down into sub-objectives, such as improving access to the asylum procedure; enhancing the quality of decision-making; and better identifying, assessing, and responding to the needs of minors. In this respect, the roadmap focused on the development of SOPs for the registration and examination of asylum applications, the provision of training and mentoring in relation to case determination, the definition of an age assessment procedure, and the design of a national training programme on the best interests of the child.

The fulfilment of the second objective concerning reception was guided by the plan to expand accommodation capacity at the two national centres in Božaj and Spuž. Actions agreed under the roadmap were therefore focused on providing technical advice on site design and the organisation of the planned extensions in line with EU standards; on the development of SOPs for the management of reception facilities; and on the organisation of training, mentoring, and study visits for Montenegrin reception officials. Given that the roadmap agreed between EASO and Montenegro only ended in December 2023 (EASO, 2022), evaluation is still ongoing and therefore the final report has not yet been published.

North Macedonia

North Macedonia is one of the countries where bilateral cooperation with EUAA is at the second stage. Following the implementation of the 2017–2019 roadmap, a second roadmap was agreed for the period between 1st October 2020 and 30th September 2022. Within the framework of the first roadmap, EASO supported national authorities in the development of SOPs for registration and case examination, while also providing training and guidance on reception. The second roadmap was organised around the same objectives identified in the course of the agency's bilateral cooperation with Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina (EASO, 2020c). The first objective concerning the harmonisation of asylum legislation and institutions included measures targeting people with special needs as well as improvements to the national training system. The second objective focused on improving the quality of decision-making in asylum procedures through training, on-the-job coaching, and operational guidance. Actions in pursuit of the third objective were focused on the improvement of reception measures for vulnerable people and consisted primarily of training, coaching, study visits, and support for the development of a protocol on health issues in the context of reception.

The implementation of the roadmap was rated as positive in the evaluation report (Zulfiu-Alili, 2022b). The roadmap was held to have improved the quality of registration and determination procedures, while moderate progress had been made in the capacity of the asylum system to deal with persons with

special needs and unaccompanied minors (Ibid.: 4). Furthermore, SOPs for registration and case examination that were developed during the first roadmap had now been operationalised (Ibid.: 12). Once again, as in the cases of Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the weak link in the cooperation programme concerned the area of reception because only a small proportion of the planned activities in this sector were actually implemented (Ibid.: 14).

Serbia

Serbia is another country, alongside North Macedonia, where the 2020–2022 roadmap built on the experience of the earlier 2017–2019 roadmap. During the first period of cooperation, EASO supported Serbian authorities in several ways, including by providing guidance, training, and on-the-job coaching. Notably, EASO also contributed to the preparation of a monitoring and evaluation mechanism for the implementation of the national Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection, which came into force in June 2018. The 2020–2022 roadmap extended the cooperation by focusing on the same three key objectives that have already been discussed in relation to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia. The first objective on the alignment of national asylum legislation and system with the CEAS was pursued through the operationalisation of the monitoring and evaluation mechanism defined during the first roadmap. Regarding the second objective on the improvement of asylum procedures, the roadmap envisaged a set of training and dissemination activities as well as the definition of an age assessment procedure. With respect to the third objective on reception, the roadmap focused on enhancing the reception of unaccompanied minors as well as on preparing a contingency plan for sudden increases in arrivals.

The final evaluation report rated the overall implementation of the roadmap as modestly effective (Šantić, 2022b: 4). Although some progress was made with respect to training and the translation and dissemination of the agency's tools, other key outcomes were not achieved (Ibid.). Notably, the monitoring and evaluation mechanism for the implementation of the national Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection was not rolled out (Ibid.). Furthermore, only limited progress was made in relation to the identification of applicants with special needs, and the contingency plan for sudden increases in arrivals had not been drawn up (Ibid.: 12–13).

Kosovo

The EUAA also signed a cooperation agreement with Kosovo, although the latter is still a potential candidate country. The 'Roadmap for Cooperation Between the EUAA and Kosovo (2022–2024)' is the latest bilateral agreement

in chronological order, and its implementation ended in February 2024 (EUAA, 2022). This was the first roadmap agreed upon by the EUAA as part of its new mandate as an agency. It will therefore act as a template for the new round of roadmaps currently under discussion in several countries across the region. The main objectives outlined in the roadmap with Kosovo were the same as those included in the roadmaps previously agreed upon with other Balkan countries.

With respect to the first objective, the EUAA aimed to enhance organisational efficiency via the development of SOPs and the establishment of a pilot national mechanism for monitoring the implementation of asylum processes. The activities defined in pursuit of the second objective consisted of on-the-job coaching, workshops, and the dissemination of information materials with a view to enhancing both access to the asylum process and the identification of people with special needs. The EUAA and Kosovar authorities also committed to proposing an age assessment procedure and improving the quality of decision-making at both determination and the administrative appeal stages. With respect to the third objective, EUAA support was aimed at developing and implementing SOPs for the new reception centre in Vranidoll, enhancing the identification and case management of vulnerable applicants, designing a dedicated facility for unaccompanied minors in Magure, and upgrading the Belvedere camp for future use within the national contingency plan (EUAA, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This chapter has offered a different take on the Balkan Route by exploring the push towards the alignment of national asylum systems with EU standards in the context of the EU enlargement process in the region. Analysis of the progress reports produced by the Commission within the framework of accession negotiations and of bilateral cooperation agreements between the EUAA and candidate countries for EU membership has allowed me to examine the influence exerted by EU actors on Balkan asylum systems. This influence can be direct in form, as in the case of the legal and institutional harmonisation that is a pre-condition for the successful completion of the integration process. Yet, influence is also exerted in more subtle ways, as borne out by the external cooperation of the EUAA which is aimed at harmonising third-country asylum processes and practices with EU standards via legal guidance, operational assistance, training, and capacity building. These changes reveal an ongoing process of externalisation of the CEAS, the future implications of which certainly deserve further analytical attention.

This chapter's in-depth analysis of the policy documents produced by the Commission and the EUAA has served not only to highlight the role of these

actors in shaping asylum systems in the region, but also to show how they contribute to representing and discursively producing said systems. The reports and roadmaps examined above detail how asylum systems in the Balkans are perceived and represented by EU actors, thus also crucially informing reflection on the rationalities underpinning such representations. On the one hand, the declared objective of the externalisation of the CEAS is to establish functioning asylum systems in the Balkans; on the other hand, this outcome might reflect a broader concern on the part of EU actors to create a buffer zone of safe third countries along one of the main migratory routes towards the EU (see, for example, Chapter 5, this volume). Hence, I venture to suggest here that the discourse of EU actors is driven to a certain extent by the aim of eventually portraying the asylum systems of these countries as functioning, effective, and aligned with EU standards. This would produce a representation of the Balkans as a safe region, harmonised with the CEAS, in which people-on-the-move could be safely and legitimately contained and to which they could be returned in the future.

As already stressed in its introduction, this chapter has a unilateral focus, meaning that it has been entirely centred on representations of Balkan asylum systems that have been produced by EU actors. This unilateral focus, however, implies interesting avenues for future research, including the analysis of the representations of this process of externalisation produced in the Balkan countries themselves, as well as the study of the ways in which EU representations are received or even resisted by institutional and non-institutional actors in the Balkans. More generally, it will be crucial going forward to supplement the top-down institutional analysis proposed here with other methods of data collection, in order to triangulate our information and add further layers of complexity to the study of this theme. For example, interviews with EU officials could reveal their views on these processes and help to tease out the objectives and rationalities at stake within them. At the same time, interviews with institutional representatives from the Balkan countries may provide insight into how changes to asylum systems are interpreted and experienced in each national context.

The rationale for this chapter is not to provide an overview of national asylum systems in the Balkans, although there is certainly a need for such analysis given the shortage of academic studies on these issues. The functioning of asylum systems in the region as well as the effects of the attempts to align them with EU law and practice are in fact important processes that deserve increasing attention as the accession process progresses. For this reason, I trust that this preliminary textual and discursive analysis should be complemented by other forms of data collection in order to explore the operationalisation of laws, policies, and regulations 'on the ground'. Arguably, extensive participant observation, as well as interviews with asylum practitioners and advocacy

groups, would enable future studies to look beyond the legal and procedural aspects of asylum systems and explore their everyday, practical implementation with a view to understanding how they actually work in these countries.

A final issue of note concerns the recent adoption of the Pact on Migration and Asylum by the Council of the European Union and especially the effects that this might produce in the Balkans. Indeed, the provisions of the new Pact – due to come fully into effect in June 2026 – will inevitably inform the accession negotiations over the coming years, as candidate countries will foreseeably be required to align themselves with the new configuration of the CEAS. This will demand fresh analytical attention because the potential implications of the new legislation for the Balkan region are wide-reaching, especially in relation to the introduction of systematic screening and border procedures and the predictable increase in the detention of asylum seekers along the Balkan Route.

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4. Mapping border walls across the Western Balkans

Alexandra Rijke

Physical barrier appears [sic] to be an effective border protection measure that serves the interest of whole EU, not just Member States of first arrival. This legitimate measure should be additionally and adequately funded from the EU budget as a matter of priority.
(Nehammer et al., 2021)

The above statement is drawn from a letter sent to the European Commission on 7 October 2021 by the governments of twelve European Union (EU) member states, namely Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, and Slovakia. These countries were calling for the EU to adapt its existing legal framework in response to the attempted ‘instrumentalisation of illegal migration for political purposes and other hybrid threats’ (Nehammer et al., 2021). One of their proposals was to obtain EU funding for the erection and maintenance of physical border barriers. On 12 January 2022, the Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson offered the following reply on behalf of the European Commission:

The Commission President reiterated on 22 October 2021, during the European Council, the Commission’s long-standing position of no EU funding for barbed wire or walls. Instead of such deterrent infrastructure, the Commission rather actively supports long-term, sophisticated integrated border management and surveillance solutions for an effective and speedy migration management and asylum system, in line with EU values and law protecting fundamental rights. (European Parliament, 2022)

However, while the European Commission has consistently refused to fund border walls, wall-building nonetheless predates the European Union since it has been practiced in Europe and beyond for centuries – we need to look no further than Hadrian’s Wall, the famous border fortification built by the Roman Empire, or the Great Wall of China (Vallet, 2022). Between 1945 and 1991, nineteen border walls were built around the world, many of which were

Cold War infrastructures (such as the walls separating the two Koreas and East and West Berlin). While some of these infrastructures were dismantled after the end of the Cold War, a large proportion of them remain functional today. Between 1991 and 2001, seven more walls were added to those that survived the end of the Cold War. After 9/11, the number of border walls built in the world has also risen dramatically. In 2022, there were seventy-four border walls, and fifteen more were planned (Ibid.). At times, the terms ‘border wall’, ‘fence’, ‘fortification’, and ‘barrier’ are used interchangeably in the relevant literature. While the materialities they describe present varying degrees of overlap, I will consistently use ‘border walls’ here. As explained by political geographer Elisabeth Vallet (2022), the term ‘border wall’ encompasses three aspects: first, it refers to a structure with a fixed masonry foundation, which can consist of solid blocks, concrete, or barbed-wire fencing. Second, it describes a fortification that marks the border between points of entry. Third, it refers to a barrier that functions either to assert territorial claims or to prevent the crossing of certain people, such as unwanted migrants, or of certain products, such as drugs (Ibid.). Hence, fences, barriers, and fortifications are all types of structures that the term ‘border wall’ can cover. However, ‘border wall’ implies a more layered materiality, allowing for the analysis of not only a specific masonry structure but also the barrier’s political nature and social ramifications.

With specific reference to the EU and the Schengen area’s external and internal borders, the overall length of border walls increased from 315 kilometres in 2014 to 2048 kilometres in 2022 (Dumbrava, 2022). One of the migration corridors most heavily affected by this surge in wall building on the external borders of the EU is the Balkan Route. In 2012, Greece started constructing a wall on its border with Turkey; followed by Bulgaria in 2014; Hungary, Slovenia, and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYRoM) in 2015; and, more recently, Serbia in 2020. However, despite the presence of these six walls, the academic literature on these specific barriers has been relatively scant and unevenly distributed. Thus, the aim of this chapter is to critically explore what has been written about these border walls to date. In so doing, I will predominantly comment on the existing academic work but, where appropriate, I will also consider ‘grey’ literature such as reports produced by international bodies and governments. Additionally, I will take into consideration some fieldnotes from initial exploratory fieldwork I conducted in North Macedonia on this topic together with my colleague Viki Mladenova in June 2024. By analysing the existing literature on border walls in the Balkans, I will also reflect on the ways in which such walls have become a constitutive element in the ‘making of the Balkan Route’. The chapter concludes with a series of propositions concerning possible directions for future research on border walls along informal migration corridors in Europe and beyond.

BORDER WALLS

The abovementioned surge in wall building and wall announcing has led to a surge in academic research focused on how such walls are legitimized and what they actually do. There is broad consensus within the existing literature on border walls in the fields of political geography and political science that the vast majority of the border walls erected since 9/11, as well as those currently being planned, represent a response to the movement of ‘unwanted people’ (see, among others, Avdan et al., 2023; Jones, 2012; Jones & Johnson, 2014; Koca, 2019; Korte, 2021; Vallet, 2014). As explained by political geographer Reece Jones in *Border Walls: Security and the War on Terror in the United States, India, and Israel* (2012), these walls reflect fear of ‘the enemy-other’: ‘the enemy-other is represented as no longer constrained by geography – as previous nation-state enemies were – and instead can strike anyone, anywhere, at any time’ (Jones, 2012: 2). Or, as remarked by Elisabeth Vallet and Charles-Philippe David, border walls – most of which are built by democratic governments – are ostensibly there so that states can ‘regain control of their borders’ (Vallet & David, 2012: 114).

Political scientist Wendy Brown characterized these walls as a reaction to difficulties experienced by nation states in governing their sovereign territories. In *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (2010), she explains: ‘the new walls often function theatrically, projecting power and efficaciousness that they do not and cannot actually exercise and that they also performatively contradict’ (Brown, 2010: 25). As Brown put it, the very existence of these border walls already denotes a loss of sovereignty. Brown’s arguments have since been taken up by other scholars studying border walls/security (see, among others, Avdan et al., 2023; Korte, 2023; McGuire, 2013; Vaughan-Williams, 2021). For example, sociologists Fabian Gülzau, Steffen Mau, and Kristina Korte (2021) have argued that the border walls built by countries such as Greece and Hungary may be seen as symbols of eroding state power in the face of increasingly complex cross-border mobilities: ‘in response, states have continuously expanded their toolkit of border control measures. In this process, governments reconfigure borders by shifting, fixing, and reinventing border controls’ (Gülzau et al., 2021: 10). According to this view, border walls are part of a constantly evolving ‘toolkit of border control measures’.

However, the ‘waning sovereignty’ of states only partially explains why border walls are built on certain borders and not on others. Political geographers Stéphane Rosière and Reece Jones (2012) have emphasized the importance of analysing the specific context of border walls. These authors explain that a closer look at these walls suggests that they are often constructed on borders that mark major wealth discontinuities. In their words, ‘a crucial aspect

of why a particular country engages in teichopolitics [the politics of building barriers on borders for various security purposes] is the economic, political, or social discontinuity the border has come to represent' (2012: 230). Similarly, in a comprehensive quantitative study of worldwide border infrastructures, Ron Hassner and Jason Wittenberg (2015) have concluded that borders are being fortified at an accelerating rate for economic rather than security reasons, particularly by countries that are richer than their neighbours. In the same vein, Fabian Gülzau and Steffen Mau have suggested that 'states erect "hard borders" primarily to reaffirm "discontinuity lines" between affluent and poor societies' (2021: 43). Their analysis shows that 'fortified borders', which account for about 20% of the world's borders, are most often located along borders where there are significant wealth gaps and/or cross-border differences in political regimes (Gülzau & Mau, 2021).

Another important line of inquiry regarding border walls is focused on whether these walls actually stop the movement of 'unwanted people' (Carter-White & Minca, 2025). While these expensive fortifications¹ are normally rhetorically sold to the general public as necessary to stop irregular migration, what emerges from the existing literature on this topic is that border walls do not actually stop people from crossing borders. Although they are made up of elaborate combinations of materialities and technologies, border walls remain porous and largely unsuccessful in regulating the movement of the 'enemy-Other' (Avdan et al., 2023; Gülzau et al., 2021; Minca & Rijke, 2017; Vallet, 2022; Vallet & David, 2012). As observed by Elisabeth Vallet (2022), 'research from around the world indicates that both the direct and indirect costs of building border walls exceed the benefits. Tunnels, drones, ladders, ramps, document forgery, and corruption – the strategies for circumventing the walls end up multiplying'.

In the words of political scientists Nazli Avdan, Andrew Rosenberg, and Christopher Gelpi, 'where there is a will, there is a way' (2023: 2). As discussed by Anna Krasteva in her analysis of the Bulgarian border wall, there is a 'contradiction between the solid materiality and high technology of the fence, and its permeability' (2020: 695). Krasteva illustrated this contradiction via multiple examples, such as local vigilantes 'arresting' migrants who have already crossed the border wall, the theatrical apprehension of migrants by local authorities within the national territory, and the high numbers of migrants still crossing the (unwalled) Bulgarian–Serbian border – migrants

¹ Border walls are typically exorbitantly expensive. For the wall built by the US on its border with Mexico, the first Trump administration requested an allocation of \$18bn in 2018 (Avdan et al., 2023), while the cost of the recently announced extension to the Greek border wall with Turkey has been estimated at €99.2m (Dimitriadi, 2023).

who are travelling to Europe and who have previously crossed the walled border between Turkey and Bulgaria. This relative porosity is actually key to the functioning of border walls, as Claudio Minca and I have already argued elsewhere (Minca & Rijke, 2017, 2019). The threat of ‘real-and-imagined migrant bodies’ and their (potential) breaching of border walls is required to legitimize these walls.

Although border walls may not ensure hermetically sealed borders, this does not mean that they do not have an impact. Rather, they are an important political technology that further differentiates between who is allowed to move unhindered and who should be stopped, checked, and possibly turned away. For those who can travel unhindered, people with the ‘right’ passport and sufficient financial means, the notion of a borderless world can still feel like a reality (Van Houtum & Van Uden, 2021). As Kristina Korte (2022) has commented, we are witnessing a process of simultaneous de-bordering and re-bordering at the global level: ‘While the number of border fences and walls is increasing worldwide, some people are nevertheless experiencing borders as more and more permeable’ (2022: 455; see also: Mau et al., 2015; Van Houtum & Van Uden, 2021). In this process, border walls are a key technology that helps sort people-on-the-move into different categories. This has been illustrated by Korte (2021) in her detailed analysis of the Hungarian border wall, which she categorized as a ‘filter border’. In other words, according to Korte, this border wall was not built to completely stop all cross-border movement, but it has helped to filter migration flows. Importantly, in contrast with other border walls such as that on the US–Mexico border, the Hungarian wall was not put up to bar the citizens of the ‘walled out’ country itself from entering. On the contrary, Serbian citizens can easily cross the border; they are not even required to have a visa. Political scientist Burcu Toğral Koca (2019) further highlighted the selective nature of the Hungarian border wall, noting that while it may appear to take a strict stance against migrants, this mostly applies to specific groups of migrants and not to others. In addition to Serbian citizens, Hungary has also allowed Ukrainian refugees to enter the country² and has kept its doors open to migrants with enough money to enter via the Hungarian ‘residency bonds’ programme, whereby ‘resident permits and a path to citizenship are granted to foreigners who invest at least €300,000 in Hungarian government securities’ (Koca, 2019: 188).

While border walls may not stop movement, they do have very real consequences. Border walls need to be circumvented or crossed by the ‘unwanted Others’ they target. This makes migrants’ journeys more difficult and forces

² A similar position was adopted by Bulgaria (Ralchev, 2022).

them to re-route or incur long delays (Vallet, 2022). Speaking about the Hungarian border wall, Korte has explained that:

The fence and the tightened legislation that came along with it led to a sharp drop in transit migration through Hungary. Many of the migrants were initially stranded in Serbia and eventually tried to move to other countries, taking different routes – mostly to Bosnia-Herzegovina and from there on to Croatia. (2021: 60)

Border walls also increase migrants' dependence on smugglers. As political scientist Angeliki Dimitriadi (2023) has confirmed in her analysis of the effects of border walls on Europe's borders: 'Fences do not deter people from moving but they do make their journeys longer and more reliant on smugglers – the very industry the EU claims it wishes to combat' (see Section 4). Often, the Route also becomes more expensive, with additional costs to migrants including 'increased travel through difficult terrain to circumvent the wall, increased [...] bribes or payments to smugglers to help them across, or increased wait times associated with remapping and redrawing access routes' (Avdan et al., 2023: 5).

Furthermore, migrants may be diverted to more dangerous routes. The walled border between Greece and Turkey, for instance, pushes migrants to choose much more perilous trajectories, such as across the Evros River or the Aegean Sea.³ In their analysis of the Greek border wall, political scientists Ioannis Grigoriadis and Esra Dilek reported that:

According to border guards, the construction of the fence led to a drop of 95 per cent in irregular migrant arrivals through the land border. However, this was accompanied by an increase of 231 per cent in arrests of irregular migrants at sea borders. (2019: 184)

These border walls do not only impact the people who are 'walled out', but also the society that is being 'walled in' (Korte, 2022). Border walls are visible proof that a government is 'doing something' in times of uncertainty (Vallet & David, 2012). Taking this one step further, Dimitriadi (2023) has argued that walls may be deemed successful in this regard at least:

³ Perhaps the most infamous example is the border wall on the US-Mexico border. In 2022, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) recorded 686 deaths and disappearances along the US-Mexico border. The vast majority of these deaths occurred in the desert areas, where there are no border walls (IOM, 2023). See also, among others, Jason De León's work on deadly migration routes across the US-Mexico desert (De León, 2015).

An important symbolic political gesture, the fence becomes the line on which the nation-state 'defends' itself against real and imagined threats. [Walls'] performative function is that they appear impenetrable, secure, and daunting. The image they conjure and the emotions they evoke, are often more important to policy makers than their actual effectiveness. (Section 4)

Similarly, Anna Krasteva (2020) pointed out that while the Bulgarian border wall does not stop people-on-the-move, it achieves three other outcomes. She described the effects of the Bulgarian border wall in terms of its 'magic' (2020: 696): more specifically, the border wall as a source of 'political magic', 'economic magic', and 'symbolic magic'. According to Krasteva, the border wall's political magic is given by its power to generate an unprecedented political consensus amongst political parties. Its economic magic consists of the additional financial investments that it attracts. Finally, the wall's symbolic magic is manifested through its theatrical effects (Krasteva, 2020). This symbolic function of border walls has also been foregrounded by Kristina Korte. In her analysis of the workings of the Hungarian–Serbian border wall, she differentiated between three possible roles of border fortifications: material, filtering, and symbolic (Korte, 2023). The material function, in terms of physically blocking people at the border, and the filtering function, in terms of letting some people pass and stopping others, are only part of how border walls work. As observed by Korte (2023: 11):

When asked about the effectiveness of the material function, some experts considered the Hungarian fence to be somewhat effective (in combination with other measures), but at the same time they considered the symbolic function as much more important, since Hungary is not actually an immigration country.

As described by Grigoriadis and Dilek (2019), the symbolic function of the Greek border wall is aimed at both a domestic and an international audience. It is meant to portray a message at both the national level, 'Greece is not an open gate to Europe and the border wall is there to protect its citizens', and the EU level, 'Greece is fulfilling its duty to the EU as a gatekeeper' (Grigoriadis & Dilek, 2019: 176). Furthermore, the border wall was built during a time of great economic depression. This made its construction even more controversial, especially given that the EU refused to fund it.

Grigoriadis and Dilek argued that the border wall also diverted the attention of the Greek general public from the economic situation to a security issue – a security issue that the Greek government was positioning itself as adequately 'handling' (2019). The importance of taking into account the role played by border walls within domestic and regional politics has also been pointed out by border studies scholar James W. Scott in his analysis of the Hungarian border wall: 'Hungary's politics of borders are linked to an emphatic re-assertion of

national identity and sovereignty as well as the imposition of a new political reality in which liberalism and its advocates are marginalized' (2021: 1). According to Scott, Hungary's government has exploited the 'refugee crisis' to retain domestic power, while, at the same time, pushing for a more conservative turn in the EU (Ibid.). Kristina Korte has also argued that it is important to analyse the domestic impact of border walls, specifically homing in on both Hungary and Serbia in her own work (2021, 2022). In her view, the Hungarian border wall actually allowed Serbia to portray itself to the EU as 'the good guy'. In relation to Hungary's domestic politics, she has suggested that 'in order to analyze the purposes of the border fence, it is thus important to understand not only against whom (or what) the fence was built, but also for whom it was built – in this case, potential Hungarian voters' (Korte, 2022: 463). To do this, she has drawn on the concepts of 'fencing in' and 'fencing out', proposing that both the impact on and intentions towards the people being 'fenced in' and those being 'fenced out' need to be analysed as different facets of the same complex process of bordering (Ibid.).

Thus, to conclude this section, border walls are an expensive and increasingly popular border technology. While they clearly make informal migration routes more dangerous, difficult, and expensive, causing migrants to become more dependent upon smugglers, they lack the capacity to completely block people-on-the-move (Avdan et al., 2023; Vallet, 2022). Furthermore, their domestic and international symbolic power seems to be at least as important as, and perhaps even more important than, their effectiveness in reducing or 'filtering' migrant mobility. In light of this set of considerations, the next section will explore the presence and impact of border walls along the Balkan Route specifically.

BORDER WALLS IN THE BALKANS

In 2015, the number of migrants moving through the Balkans on their way to the EU increased significantly. While the region had previously served as a transit area for migrants over many decades, as reflected in Greece's and Bulgaria's moves to construct their border walls in 2012 and 2014, respectively, the number of people from outside of Europe moving through the area in 2015 was unprecedented in recent decades (Beznec et al., 2016). At first, most of the countries along the Balkan Route allowed migrants to cross their borders, perhaps not knowing what else to do, but also aware that these people would keep moving north. Some countries, such as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia, also facilitated the migrants' transit by laying on trains and buses (Hameršak et al., 2020). However, this only lasted a few months. In response to Austria tightening its border controls already in the summer of 2015, Hungary began building a wall on its border with Serbia in

July 2015 (completed in October 2015) and quickly followed up with another wall on its border with Croatia in September 2015. Slovenia followed suit and started constructing a wall on its border with Croatia in November 2015, at about the same time as North Macedonia completed a wall on its border with Greece (Dumbrava, 2022). With Croatia's entry into the Schengen area, these two walls on its borders have become somewhat obsolete and are planned to be/have partially been removed (Bandic, 2022; Desku, 2023; Euronews, 2022).⁴ In 2020, Serbia initiated the construction of the latest addition to the walled borders in the Balkans along its border with North Macedonia.

While analysing the national specificities of border walls is important, the interconnectedness of the border walls in the Balkans should not be overlooked. However, this aspect has received limited attention in the academic literature to date. Yet, events along one segment of the Balkan Route often affect the corridor as a whole (see Chapter 1, this volume). For example, the border walls built in 2015 and 2016 in this region should be viewed as part of the same overarching process – the closure of the informal humanitarian corridor that operated across the region for a few months during the so-called 'long summer of migration'. Accordingly, in the following subsections, I discuss each of the five border walls currently present in the Balkans, delving into some of their specificities, while also addressing their interrelatedness. In so doing, I predominantly draw on the academic literature but, where appropriate, I also engage with salient grey literature. Furthermore, in the sections that examine the walls on the borders of North Macedonia, I have included some preliminary notes from the fieldwork that I conducted in the area in June 2024.

On the Greek–Turkish Border

In 2012, Greece constructed a 4-metre-high fence on its border with Turkey. This border wall, which initially was only 10.3 kilometres long, consisted of 'six serial barbed wire lines with thermal sensor cameras and continuous patrol service' (Besenyo, 2017: 80). It was built between the villages of Kastanies and Nea Vyssa on the Greek side of the land border (Grigoriadis & Dilek, 2019).⁵ The border wall has since been extended and is currently a 37.5-kilometre-long, 5-metre-high steel fence. In April 2023, the Ministers of Migration and Asylum and Citizen Protection and Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis signed a contract for the wall along the Greek-Turkish border to be

⁴ Given that these walls are planned to be taken down, they are not discussed here.

⁵ Much of the land border between Greece and Turkey follows the course of the Evros river. The first part of the border wall has been built on the sections of the land where the border deviates from the river.

extended, a project that will double the current border wall and is estimated to cost €99.2 million (Dimitriadi, 2023).

The land border between Greece and Turkey has seen hundreds of thousands of migrants seeking to enter the EU over the last two decades and has been characterized as one of the most heavily militarized borders in Europe (Ibid.). While 14,461 people were estimated to have crossed the land border between Greece and Turkey in 2008, this number went up to 54,974 in 2011 (Ibid.). In 2014, less than 2,000 people were estimated to have crossed the land border between Greece and Turkey. This figure has remained relatively low, with 6,162 people putatively having used the land border in 2023 (IOM, n.d.). The border wall has accordingly been celebrated as a 'success' by the Greek state – in January 2023, the Minister of Citizen Protection, Takis Theodorikakos stated that the border wall had stopped 260,000 migrants from entering the country in 2022 and helped to arrest 1,500 traffickers (Kantouris, 2023). The drop in the number of people entering Greece via the land border has been accompanied by an increase in the number of people entering via the sea border. In 2011, 1,114 entered Greece via this border, while in 2014 this went up to 43,618 (Dimitriadi, 2023). This number has remained high, with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) registering 41,768 people crossing the sea border in 2023 (IOM, 2024). Although the reasons for this rerouting are unclear, and it is impossible to determine the precise impact of the border wall, there is firm evidence that people-on-the-move are still entering Greece.

Greece requested EU funding for the border wall in 2010, but this application was rejected. As stated by the European Commissioner for Home Affairs, Cecilia Malmström, in February 2012: 'The Commission considers that the construction of a technical barrier in Evros at the Greek/Turkish border is not an effective measure to counter irregular migration [...]', adding that the Commission was ready to '[...] co-finance other more effective measures within the comprehensive strategy that Greek authorities have planned to establish to ensure an integrated border management system for the whole length of the land border between Greece and Turkey' (European Parliament, 2012). While constructing the border wall amidst economic depression and without EU funding was controversial, it was nevertheless completed. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Grigoriadis and Dilek (2019) suggested that the border wall has also served to deflect public attention away from the dire economic conditions afflicting the country and towards the issue of securitizing its borders; something the Greek government could tangibly show it was addressing. Greece has once again requested EU funding for the latest planned extension of its border wall, but this request too has been denied. However, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis has insisted that the extension will go ahead, even without EU funding (AFP, 2023).

On the Bulgarian–Turkish Border

Bulgaria began constructing a wall along its border with Turkey in 2014. Initially a 33-kilometre-long razor-wire fence, it was extended to 235 kilometres in 2017 (Dumbrava, 2022). The wall is 3 metres high and reinforced with razor-wire coils (Mortimer, 2015). It was built in response to the high number of migrants entering the country in the preceding years. According to the Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees, the number of migrants increased sixfold from 1,387 people in 2012 to 7,144 in 2013 and continued to increase, reaching 20,391 in 2015 (Krasteva, 2020). While in other countries in the region the movement of migrants dropped after the ‘closure’ of the Balkan Route, it has remained high in Bulgaria (Ibid.). IOM recorded the arrival of 18,554 migrants in Bulgaria in 2023 (IOM, n.d.). As explained by Plamen Ralchev, a professor of international relations at the University of National and World Economy in Sofia, most migrants see Bulgaria as a transit country. It was thus anticipated that the vast majority of these migrants would move on to other countries. This is because Bulgaria is one of the poorest countries in the EU, and so most migrants prefer to move on from there to Western Europe (Ralchev, 2022).

As suggested by the statistics cited above, the border wall did not stop people from entering the country. According to Ralchev (2022), many sections of the border wall have sustained damage, and both migrants and government officials admit it can be crossed without great difficulty. This does not mean that the route through Bulgaria as a whole is an easy one for the migrants. As explained by Krasteva (2020), there has been an increase in paramilitary groups operating along the border who (at times violently) ‘arrest’ migrants. Furthermore, Bulgarian border guards have been reported to have violently attacked migrants – beating, robbing and stripping them, and using police dogs – and to have (illegally) pushed migrants back into Turkey (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Bulgaria, which has been a member of the EU since 2007, has recently become a member of the Schengen area. Air and sea border controls were lifted in March 2024, and in January 2025 Bulgaria has fully become part of the Schengen space of free circulation. During its journey towards Schengen membership, Bulgaria’s border wall was a key focus. The so-called ‘Air Schengen’ formula was proposed by Austria, whose position was that full Schengen membership will only be possible when Bulgaria’s land borders are fully secured. Austria’s proposal was paired with a list of demands, including an increase in the number of Frontex officers⁶ deployed at the border and

⁶ Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, is the border enforcement agency responsible for managing and coordinating the external

EU funding for the further development of Bulgaria's border infrastructure (Liboreiro, 2023). The number of Frontex officers has indeed been increased: in early 2024, 500 extra Frontex officers were sent to support the implementation of border controls (Reuters, 2024). However, discussions regarding the further development of Bulgaria's border infrastructure were ongoing at the time of writing this chapter (European Union, n.d.).

On the Hungarian–Serbian Border

As noted at the outset of this chapter, after Austria tightened its borders in the summer of 2015, Hungary began to build a wall on the border with Serbia in July 2015, quickly followed by a wall on the border with Croatia in September 2015. It has been estimated that over 400,000 people crossed Hungary's borders in 2015, and as a Hungarian government spokesman, Zoltán Kovács, put it in June 2015: 'we need to stop the flood' (Kingsley, 2015). Protection against immigration and terrorism was cited by the Hungarian government as justification for these border walls but, as Kristina Korte has pointed out, 'although Hungary was affected by the so-called refugee crisis in the sense that hundreds of thousands of people entered the country, the effect was limited, since the majority of them only transited through' (2021: 56).

The border wall between Hungary and Serbia, which was reinforced in 2017 (Sandford, 2017), consists of a 4-metre-high double fence, topped with barbed wire. The fence is partly electrified and reinforced with wire mesh and a concrete foundation, and it features heat sensors and cameras. It covers the entire border with Serbia and is 155 kilometres long (Korte, 2022). In addition to the border walls, Hungary created two 'transit zones' along the border with Serbia in 2015: in practice, two containers where migrants travelling from Serbia to Hungary can request asylum. These were set up with a view to expediting this process and overseeing it to completion. Given that Hungary had declared Serbia a 'safe third country', almost all claims are deemed 'inadmissible'. This allowed Hungary to immediately send people back to the Serbian side of the border wall. Given that the border wall has been constructed on Hungarian soil, this simply means sending migrants to the other side of the wall. As such, they are not technically being 'pushed back' to Serbia, a practice that is illegal under EU law and violates the Geneva Conventions, but rather remain inside Hungary (Beznec et al., 2016; Minca & Collins, 2021; Šantić et al., 2017).⁷

borders of the EU member states (Frontex, n.d.).

⁷ Hungary has been reported for enforcing pushbacks to deport migrants to Serbia, a practice sanctioned nevertheless by the European Court of Justice in 2020 as being in violation of EU law (DW News, 2020).

The border wall and transit zones soon led to the formation of makeshift camps on the Serbian side of the border, where people waited to hear if they would be allowed to enter the transit zones (Cantat, 2017). So-called ‘waiting lists’ were drawn up with the names of those entitled to access the transit zone. While the Hungarian government decided on the number of people on the list, ‘a group of “community leaders” was apparently entitled to manage the list and cooperate with the Hungarian border authorities to select the [...] individuals admitted through special “migrant doors” at the two border points [...]’ (Minca et al., 2018: 54; see also Minca & Collins, 2021). In 2018, the waiting time to access the transit zones was estimated to be around 1.5–2 years and these irregularly and arbitrarily managed waiting lists, combined with the border walls, were ‘used to create an image of legality and order’ (Korte, 2023: 13), while keeping those waiting in a continuous state of limbo. After a European Court of Justice ruling in 2020 in which it was stated that people could not be detained for more than twenty-eight days in these transit zones, while some had been detained there for 400 days, the Hungarian government announced that it would close the zones (Balkan Insight, 2020).

The border wall has been described as a great success by Hungarian politicians (Jamieson, 2018; Visegrád Post, 2017), and initial data presented by the Hungarian police only a few months after the border wall had been erected in 2015 indicated a significant decrease in the number of migrants intercepted since the completion of the wall (Besenyo, 2017). Together with tighter legislation – which, for instance, criminalized irregular border crossings and ‘legalized’ pushbacks, whereby any migrant found within 8 kilometres of the border wall could be deported to Serbia – and heightened police violence, the wall made the border much more dangerous and expensive for people-on-the-move. However, while many migrants were initially stranded in Serbia and many of them diverted to Bosnia and Herzegovina and to Croatia, this did not mean that this branch of the Route closed altogether (Minca & Umek, 2020; Minca & Collins, 2021). Hungary’s border was indeed relatively porous until recently. In 2021, the number of migrants intercepted in Austria nearly doubled, rising from 21,641 in 2020 to around 40,000 in 2022 (Than, 2022). According to the Austrian Interior Ministry, the vast majority of these had entered the country via Hungary (Ibid.). Unfortunately, at the time of writing, I was unable to access further data on how many people have crossed the border between Hungary and Serbia in recent years.

While the border wall’s effectiveness in halting irregular border crossings remains open to debate, Hungary has, however, successfully used it as a political tool. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz Party has used the border wall and its putative effectiveness in reducing irregular border crossings for political gain, especially during election campaigns. For example, the topic of the border wall was leveraged in the run-up to the parliamentary election

of 2018, which was won by Fidesz (Korte, 2022). Furthermore, as previously mentioned, the Hungarian government has also linked its border policy to the reaffirmation of Hungarian identity and sovereignty, the oppression of liberalism, and the push for a more conservative turn within the EU (Scott, 2021).

On the Macedonian–Greek Border

In November 2015, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia built several stretches of wall along its border with Greece. This border wall, which covered 37 kilometres of the 172-km-long border, was made of 3-metre-high double razor-wire fences (Hall, 2016). While its construction was announced in response to an increase in migrants crossing the border, the emergence of this border wall should not be seen as independent of Hungary and Slovenia closing their own borders in the same period (Williams, n.d.).

Macedonia⁸ has long been viewed as a transit country. However, prior to 2015, the people moving through Macedonia were relatively invisible. As commented by a local activist interviewed by Beznec, Speer, and Stojic Mitrović: ‘It’s just we couldn’t really see them, because they were going through the forests. And the numbers of people crossing were significantly smaller’ (2016: 15). This changed in 2015, when the scale of transit increased significantly and people-on-the-move became visible as they walked along the train tracks towards Serbia. In the beginning, the Macedonian authorities allowed the migrants to cross the country – at times aiding them by putting on extra trains – based on the awareness that Macedonia was not their final destination (Beznec et al., 2016).

However, in August 2015, the border was closed for three days. It remains unclear exactly why the Macedonian authorities decided to close its southern border with Greece at that time. A report published by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Foundation (Beznec et al., 2016) speculated this may have been a strategy to put pressure on the EU to provide North Macedonia with more financial support, as well as a response to domestic pressures. As argued by Agata Domachowska, the closure of August 2015 was necessarily brief because it was not deemed feasible to keep the thousands of people – including families with young children – on the other side of the border wall away with tear gas and violence (2019). The border was opened, but closed again in November, except for people travelling from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. This policy, which echoed similar policies in Croatia and Slovenia, was accompanied by

⁸ For the purposes of brevity and continuity, at times this chapter uses the term ‘Macedonia’ to refer to ‘the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia’ (FYRoM) – as it was called prior to 2018 – as well as ‘North Macedonia’ (as it has been called since 2018).

the construction of a border wall (Domachowska, 2019). As stated by Nikola Poposki, Macedonia's Foreign Minister, 'we too will need some kind of physical defense to reduce illegal border crossing [...] Either soldiers or a fence or a combination of the two' (TIME, 2015).

The border wall was said not to be aimed at closing the border – which may also be deduced from the fact that it only blocked off a small part of the 172-km border (Milenkoski & Talevski, 2001) – but rather at 'funneling' migrants to border crossings where they could be checked. However, the location of the border wall also seems to have been partly determined by the terrain. As explained by a humanitarian worker working with migrants in North Macedonia:

The rest of the terrain here is mountainous. It's very hard, very difficult to cross and there's no need for [...] according to what the authorities might envisage, for the protection of its border, there is no need for [a] border fence.⁹ (Interviewed in June 2024)

As declared by the Macedonian government at the time of the wall's construction, 'the border will remain open and all migrants from the war-affected zones will be allowed to enter' (Kantouris & Testorides, 2015). The new travel restrictions and erection of the border wall in November 2015 were met with protests by migrants suddenly finding themselves stuck at the border. This led to violent clashes between them and the Macedonian border police during the initial stages of construction (Eleftheriou-Smith, 2016). The Gevgelija (Macedonia)–Idomeni (Greece) crossing played a key part in these events, while a second section of the border wall was constructed at the Medžitlija–Niki crossing (Domachowska, 2019). Gevgelija–Idomeni had been a key transit point along the Balkan Route, but after the border closed, a makeshift camp sprang up in early 2016 on the Greek side of the border wall. This camp was located at the train tracks near Idomeni and briefly housed thousands of people (Jordan & Minca, 2023; Katz et al., 2018). The camp, where conditions were described as disastrous due to the lack of facilities, was dismantled by the Greek authorities in May 2016 (Pelliccia, 2019).

While the border wall was reinforced in August 2016 (DW News, 2016), it is unclear what state it is in as I write. It is likewise difficult to establish what impact the border wall had after the Idomeni camp was dismantled and whether the border wall has been nationally or regionally framed as 'successful'. Little information is available on these matters. IOM has reported 22,379 people-on-the-move crossing North Macedonia in 2022 and only 11,795 in

⁹ During the interview, the interviewee often referred to the border wall as the (border) 'fence'.

2023 (IOM, n.d.). The border wall is, however, unlikely to have contributed much to this recent decline in arrivals, although this cannot be claimed with certainty either. Claudio Minca and Dragan Umek, for example, in research conducted in Italy with migrants who had completed the Route, found no evidence that this specific border wall had impacted their journey (see Chapter 7, this volume). Nevertheless, further research is required to better appreciate the role this wall has played historically and continues to play today. Overall, this border wall seems to have primarily been constructed as a response to other countries further north closing their borders and in keeping with their related claims to have ‘closed the Balkan Route’. Now that the situation has settled down following early responses to the humanitarian emergency that impacted the Balkans in 2015, and with thousands of migrants who keep moving north via this territory every year, this border wall may have lost (part of) its significance.

On the Serbian–North Macedonian Border

The most recent addition to the border walls present in the Balkans is the wall Serbia is currently building on its border with North Macedonia. In August 2020, Serbia began constructing a border wall to the east of the main highway from North Macedonia to Serbia. The border wall comprises two 5-metre-high fences, reinforced with razor-wire coils, and its appearance has been compared to the Hungarian border wall on the border with Serbia (KlikAktiv, 2021). An extension to the west of the main highway, near the village of Miratovac, as well as the addition of a third fence, made up entirely of barbed wire, was announced in August 2020. This new segment of wall was meant to be constructed between the Serbian villages of Miratovac and Slavujevac (KlikAktiv, 2022). However, while visiting the area in June 2024, the wall appeared to be only a few kilometres long and confined to the east of the train tracks. At that time, there was no further construction taking place.

According to KlikAktiv (2021), a Serbian NGO that provides legal support to refugees, the Serbian government used the Covid-19 pandemic and a decree aimed at preventing the spread of this infectious disease to legally occupy the land alongside the border and to start constructing the border wall. As reported by the Serbian news channel N1, the mayor of the border municipality of Preševo stated that the construction of the border wall was part of a deal with the EU, adding: ‘We think that the fence is an additional protection of the boundaries with the non-EU countries from an influx of refugees who might again come en masse through the Balkan Route’ (N1 Belgrade, 2020a). Two days later, N1 reported that the European Commission had commented that while financial and technical support had been provided to Serbia to manage migration, ‘those funds, however, do not include building fences which, as it

has been wrongly published, is not a part of any agreement' (N1 Belgrade, 2020b).

Very little information can be found on this border wall. KlikAktiv has published two short reports (2021, 2022) on the development of the wall, and only a few news stories have been devoted to it.¹⁰ Hence, at the time of writing, it remains unclear whether this wall will be further extended and what influence it might have on migrants, the local population, and national and international politics.

WHAT'S NEXT?

In conclusion, and in light of the literature just reviewed, three key questions seem to emerge that may inform future research on border walls along this informal migration corridor: first, how can border walls in the Balkans be analysed as part of 'a route'? Second, can we investigate the impact of these walls on both people-on-the-move and the residents of border regions? Third, what are the methodological implications of the fact that border walls are difficult, if not impossible, to study 'on the ground' due to restrictions imposed by the respective governments, while at the same time official data on these infrastructures remain relatively scarce and difficult to obtain?

Let us start by considering the importance of analysing the border walls as part of 'a migration route'. As discussed in this chapter, bordering practices in a given Balkan country are often influenced by the practices of neighbouring countries. For example, studying the border wall built by North Macedonia on its border with Greece requires taking into account the bordering practices of Serbia, Hungary, Slovenia, and Austria. While this cannot be stated conclusively, one could speculate that if these countries had kept their borders open in 2015 and beyond, North Macedonia might not have constructed a wall on its Greek border (see Minca & Collins, 2021). It could also be argued that without the Balkan Route, there would most likely be no border walls in this region and that, at the same time, without border walls the Route would function very differently. While it remains important to appreciate the national specificity of border walls, it is crucial to examine the walls' role along the Route as a whole, including their broader geopolitical implications. As I have stated elsewhere with Claudio Minca, a decline in crossings at one border typically implies a rise at another (Minca & Rijke, 2017). This was clearly observed when the Hungarian border wall was constructed, as many people-on-the-move modified their route, opting to cross through Croatia and later Bosnia and Herzegovina rather than attempting to cross from Serbia into Hungary

¹⁰ ANSA, 2020; Dawn, 2020; N1 Belgrade, 2020a, 2020b.

(Minca & Umek, 2020). Hence, to better understand why border walls are built in the first place and what effects they have once made operational, future research should adopt a 'regional' perspective, considering how each specific barrier impacts the dynamics of the entire migration corridor.

Secondly, and as already mentioned in this chapter, border walls 'wall out' but also 'wall in'. While the experiences of people being 'walled out' have been studied (see, for instance, Hess & Petrogiannis, 2020) as have the domestic politics of countries that have built them (see, for example, Scott's [2021] and Korte's [2022] analyses of the related situation in Hungary), the effects of these walls on the daily lives of those who are 'walled in' have rarely been analysed (but see Vaughan-Williams, 2021). These walls have been constructed along borders that were previously quite open for local populations. Crossing borders for work, school, visiting family, shopping, and even small-scale smuggling of goods like cigarettes, alcohol, or petrol, were common daily activities (see, for example, Archer & Rácz, 2012). Furthermore, farmers may own land right up to the border or even on both sides. Border walls impact all of these practices. Therefore, more empirical research is needed to jointly investigate the experiences of the two groups – those 'walled in' and those 'walled out' (see also Korte, 2021).

Thirdly, we come to the methodological question of how border walls may be studied. As explained at the beginning of this chapter, a border wall consists of both its material reality and the social and political effects it generates. In the existing work on border walls in political geography and political science, the materiality of these walls is often overlooked. While academic papers frequently provide brief descriptions of the walls' physical characteristics, such as their height and length – as I have also done in this chapter – other material aspects are rarely analysed in depth. The materiality of border walls – in terms of their un/wieldiness, sharp and pointy wiring, cameras, and heat sensors, as well as the possible presence of dogs and soldiers – is crucial not only to the walls' functioning but also to the daily practices of the people confronted by them. But how can one study such materialities and their impact in detail when the area around a border wall is often a militarized space, generally inaccessible to researchers? This is a key question I aim to address more fully in my forthcoming work and as part of my contribution to the ERC project TheGAME, which has prompted this initial exploration of the literature on border walls as a critical feature of the Balkan Route.

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PART II

Regional dispatches

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5. From ‘transit zone’ to ‘buffer zone’ to ... On Serbian camp geographies and the Balkan Route

Dragan Umek and Claudio Minca

Over twenty coaches are lined up along a narrow country road, not far from the town of Šid. A traffic jam of such proportions may never have been seen along this road [...] These are private coaches arriving from Belgrade, unloading hundreds of migrants embarking on the Balkan Route near the Croatian border. A little further on, in a clearing amid freshly cut maize fields, a crowd waits their turn to cross the border. Along the final stretch of road leading to an improvised checkpoint are several tents set up by non-governmental organizations, some chemical toilets, a few food and clothing distribution points, and a Médecins Sans Frontières medical station and a UNHCR [United Nations High Commission for Refugees] container. On the other side, past the gazebo of the Croatian police, a single coach waits to transport migrants to the nearby camp [...]

(Fieldnotes, Berkasovo-Bapska Border, 18 October 2015)

The acrid smell of smoke wafting from the shacks reaches you even before the first squats come into view, clustered behind the old railway station. This disused area, stretching along the tracks towards the Sava River, has become a huge makeshift camp for hundreds of migrants stranded in Serbia after the closure of the Balkan Route. The words ‘Open the border’, painted in large letters on a wall at the entrance to this vast urban squat, capture the frustration and hopes of those unable to continue their journey. They now face a harsh winter under inhumane conditions in dilapidated shacks. In the distance, beyond the ruins, another sign reads ‘Eagle Hills’ – a stark reminder and harbinger of the Savamala district’s impending transformation into the ‘Dubai of the Balkans’.

(Fieldnotes, Central Belgrade, 25 January 2017)

Compared to our previous visit to Subotica, the absence of migrants in the city’s streets and parks is striking. However, there is a quiet tension in the air that we did not sense during earlier visits. This may be a consequence of the ‘normalization’ of the city’s public spaces imposed by the local authorities after repeated episodes of violence among migrants unsettled the local

population. The reception centres in the north, formerly chaotic and overcrowded, now accommodate only a small number of migrants. Meanwhile, the vast majority have become 'invisible', concealed within smuggling networks that operate true 'transit hubs' at multiple sites along the border with Hungary. (Fieldnotes, Subotica, 23 May 2023)

During our recent visit to northern Serbia, we confirmed the existence of an archipelago of informal camps that had been hosting thousands of migrants in the region for years. However, in the final months of 2023, the institutional camps in the north were shut down, informal camps were dismantled, and the migration route was largely redirected to Bosnia. What remains is a residual archaeology of makeshift camps around Subotica and Sombor – traces left by migrants of all origins, genders and ages who attempted 'the Game' by crossing the infamous Hungarian border fence.

Today, very few migrants continue their journey in this direction.
For now.
(Fieldnotes, Northern Serbia, July–September 2024)

As illustrated in the epigraphs opening this chapter, the geographies of the Balkan Route in Serbia have undergone several dramatic changes during the last ten years or so. These shifts have often been tied to broader geopolitical strategies implemented at the national level, as well as to evolving border regimes and asylum policies across the region and in the European Union (EU). At the start of the so-called 'refugee crisis' in 2015, during what is known in the literature as the 'long summer of migration' (Kasperek & Speer, 2015), it quickly became evident that Serbia would play a key role in shaping the new geography of informal refugee mobility then emerging along the Balkan Route (Zuparić-Iljić & Valenta, 2018). Serbia's central position in the Balkans, combined with its fragile and historically unstable political relations with neighbouring countries, make for a complex political context. The various implications of the EU accession process further complicate this backdrop and have also influenced the events and strategies surrounding the Balkan Route in Serbia over the past decade (Rea et al., 2019; Umek et al., 2019; Umek & Minca, 2024a). Accordingly, this chapter examines the role of Serbia's geopolitical strategies in the development of the informal Balkan corridor through the analytical lens of the country's refugee camp politics. Our discussion focuses in particular on how Serbia's northern territories have seen the emergence of a complex and unstable geography of informal refugee mobilities, largely in response to shifting EU border and humanitarian policies and the imposition of restrictions on mobility by neighbouring countries, especially Croatia, Hungary, and Romania (see BBC News, 2016).

Growing attention to this informal migration corridor in Serbia in recent years has generated a considerable amount of non-academic literature on the activities of humanitarian and voluntary organizations involved in supporting migrants in the region. This literature comprises reports, surveys, collections of testimonies, and ‘reportage’ material that is typically disseminated via online channels or, in some cases, as more substantial editorial output (see, for example, BVMN [Border Violence Monitoring Network], 2024; KlikAktiv, 2024a, 2024b; No Name Kitchen, 2024). However, alongside this ‘grey’ literature, a growing body of academic work has focused on the sociopolitical dimension of ‘informal’ migrant mobility in Serbia, most frequently in relation to the border policies and highly specific camp politics implemented by the authorities (see, among others, Cantat, 2020; Jordan & Minca, 2023a; Jovanović, 2020; Jovanović et al., 2022; Kilibarda, 2016; Šantić et al., 2017; Seichter et al., 2020). For example, Mandić (2018) criticized the Serbian reception system for prioritizing the rapid transit of migrants to the next country over efforts at social integration or long-term humanitarian protection. At the same time, both Obradović-Wochnik (2018) and Stojić Mitrović and Vilenica (2019) discussed the Belgrade refugee situation in relation to housing and the use of public spaces. Following Tazzioli (2020), who argued that state authorities often seem determined to keep migrants on the move, politically leveraging their mobility as a means of managing their unruly presence, Minca and Collins (2021) have analysed ‘the Game’ in the Serbian context. This term – used by people-on-the-move themselves – denotes, in reference to Serbia and to the Balkan Route more generally, the complex geographies that characterize migrants repeated and often failed attempts to cross national borders into the Schengen Area. Such attempts are sometimes encouraged, sometimes curbed, and sometimes outright blocked by the authorities, leading to a forced circularity within the Route (Ibid.). Indeed, migrants’ mobility along informal routes is often disrupted by extended periods of immobility, due to various factors tied to specific conditions in the regions and countries they are travelling through, including Serbia (on migrants’ ‘non-movements’ see, among others, Squire, 2020).

Thus, El-Shaarawi and Razsa (2019) described informal mobilities along the Balkan Route as a ‘set of movements’ characterized by ‘nodes of mobility and immobility’. Such nodes include informal camps in forests and squats (in locations such as Athens, Belgrade, Šid, Bihać, Trieste, etc.), where migrants availing of ‘informal spaces and urban interstices’ (Umek & Minca, 2024a, 2024b) gather to rest, regroup, exchange information, and meet with smugglers (Jordan & Minca, 2023b). Accordingly, in our own previous work we examined the role of formal (and related informal) camps in both supporting and containing migrant mobilities, exploring their evolution and broader geopolitical underpinnings, particularly in the Serbian context (Carter-White & Minca

2025; Minca et al., 2018, 2019; Šantić et al., 2017; Umek et al., 2019). Collins (2024), meanwhile, conducted in-depth analysis of life at selected Serbian reception centres, highlighting the role of these sites in providing humanitarian support as well as their contribution to the emergence of a 'campscape' in the Serbian capital, Belgrade (Collins & Minca, 2024). This campscape both implicitly and materially facilitated the informal mobility of migrants towards their desired destinations within the EU (see also Collins et al., 2022; Collins & Minca, 2025). Similarly, in a recent paper, we have explored the emergence of a 'refugee hub' in Belgrade, defined as an interconnected set of formal and informal refugee spatialities that reflect the capital's role as a key transit point along the Balkan Route¹ (Umek & Minca, 2024a).

In light of this brief and selective review of the literature on Serbia and the Balkan Route, in this chapter we adopt a specific geographical perspective to explore the relatively overlooked pivotal role of Serbia and its refugee camp politics in shaping and continuously reshaping the Balkan migration corridor. The work we present here is based on a decade of field research (2015–2024), which has intensified since the start of the European Research Council (ERC) project TheGAME in 2022. In all, we have made over twenty trips to Serbia, regularly visiting reception centres and informal camps along the borders and in the main cities affected by the flow of refugees (Belgrade, Šid, Subotica, Sombor, Preševo, Kikinda, etc.). These numerous visits, conducted over several years, have enabled close observation of the significant changes in camp geographies along the Route that we undertake to explore here. They have also supported the use of methods appropriate to our line of argument in this chapter. In particular, the analysis that follows is based on extensive participant observation, dozens of semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with migrants, humanitarian workers, volunteers, representatives of the authorities, and camp managers, and the analysis of official reports published by government agencies and the national and local press.

The chapter is organized into three main sections, dealing respectively with: (1) the first phase in the formation of the Serbian 'section' of the Route since, and partly prior to, 2015; (2) the subsequent consolidation of the informal corridor that has turned Serbia into a sort of buffer zone along the Balkan Route, with Belgrade as its main 'refugee transit hub'; (3) the emergence of a new, complex geography of informal migration mobility managed by increasingly powerful networks of smugglers in the northern regions close to the border, a geography that has seen the city of Sombor become a major informal 'refugee transit hub'. In the conclusion, we discuss how the important role of the

¹ For a critical review of the academic literature on the Balkan Route, see Chapter 1, this volume.

northern part of the country has been confirmed by recent geopolitical developments, including the closure of camps in that border region and the consequent deflection of the Route towards Bosnia.

THE BEGINNINGS: SERBIA AND THE BALKAN ROUTE (2015)

Beginning in May 2015, Serbia, like the other Balkan countries, faced one of the gravest international humanitarian ‘crises’ in decades, a crisis driven by the large-scale arrival of migrants from conflict zones in Asia and the Middle East (for a critical analysis of the notion of crisis in this context, see Minca et al., 2018). However, this ‘crisis’ was only the culmination of a growth in arrivals that had been underway for some time, albeit on a far smaller scale than in 2015. More specifically, the number of people who expressed the intention to seek asylum in 2015 was 579,518 (which accounted for only part of total arrivals), representing a phenomenal increase with respect to the preceding years: asylum applications had numbered 16,490 in 2014, 5,066 in 2013, and only 2,723 in 2012 (Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, 2016). The largest groups of applicants were from Syria, Eritrea, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and had arrived in Serbia overland from Turkey via Greece and FYR Macedonia, a more accessible trajectory than the alternative trajectory through Bulgaria and Romania (Ibid.).

None of the countries that made up this unprecedented ‘semi-legal humanitarian corridor’ in 2015 (and through part of 2016) were the intended final destination of this massive movement of people. Rather, they were only intermediate stages in migrant journeys to elsewhere in Northern and Central Europe. This was also true of Serbia: despite the large numbers who formally declared that they wished to remain in the country, in reality most of these people-on-the-move did not intend to stay there given the lack of economic opportunities and/or the fact that they already had family or friends in other European countries (Lukić, 2016: 32–33).

The Serbian government’s first response to the spike in arrivals in 2015 was to set up a working group on migration² with the brief of coordinating the work of the various institutions involved in the reception and assistance of refugees (Think Tank European Parliament, 2016). The tasks included building new reception centres and upgrading existing ones, organizing healthcare and the distribution of food and non-food items, and enhancing the registration and

² This group included representatives from five ministries, as well as the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration and the EU Delegation in Serbia.

identification system. The Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (hereafter the Commissariat),³ was the government agency charged with the day-to-day management of most of the national reception system, which comprised a network of *asylum centres* (*centri za azil*) and *reception centres* (*prihvatini centri*; at times translated as *one stop centres*). The former were reserved for those who intended to apply for asylum in Serbia, while the latter were put in place to provide temporary, on-the-spot humanitarian relief to the growing number of migrants entering the country (Minca et al., 2018). However, this distinction between the two types of centres tended not to be strictly enforced, given that in practice the different prerogatives of these facilities were flexibly adapted to the needs of individual migrants. Thus, during the key months in 2015 that marked the opening of a humanitarian corridor along the Balkan Route, all the camps functioned as de facto 'short-term accommodation' centres for those waiting to continue their journey towards the border (Ibid.: 39).

As the (perceived) humanitarian emergency became more entrenched, the Commissariat gradually set up a network of reception centres across the country, including in: Preševo, Bujanovac, Divljana, Pirot, Bosilegrad, Dimitrovgrad, Obrenovac, Adaševci, Šid-stanica, Principovac, Subotica, Kikinda, and Sombor. Six asylum centres were opened at Krnjača, Banja Koviljača, Bogovadja, Sjenica, Tutin, and Vranje.⁴ In addition, during the summer of 2015, a number of 'hotspot and temporary centres' were set up at border crossings as first aid and support stations for migrants entering or leaving Serbian territory; the most active of these were at Kelebija-Tompa and Horgoš-Röszke on the Hungarian border, Berkasovo-Bapska and Morović on the Croatian border, Gradinje-Katolina on the Bulgarian border, and Miratovac-Lojane at the southern border crossing with North Macedonia (Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, 2017, 2022). This new geography of centres resulted in a sort of 'archipelago' of refugee camps organized in 'clusters' or sets of interconnected accommodation facilities strategically distributed across different regions of Serbia, with some located at entry points into the country and others at exit points (Minca et al., 2018; Umek et al., 2019). While the former represented the first line of assistance, with a focus on identifying

³ The official title of this agency is Komesarijat za Izbeglice i Migracije (Commissariat for Refugees and Migration). It was originally set up in 1992 as the 'Commissariat for Refugees', an executive agency of the Ministry of Interior tasked with addressing issues related to Serbian refugees and displaced persons from other former Yugoslav republics.

⁴ Some of these facilities were already reception centres for refugees and internally displaced persons, a legacy of the war in former Yugoslavia, but were repurposed for the new emergency, while others were converted from out-of-use factories, former barracks, youth camps, or even abandoned motels.

and providing first aid to those arriving via the Route, the latter were primarily used by people-on-the-move as ‘waiting areas’ before crossing into Hungary or Croatia (see Figure 5.1).

The entire management of this ‘refugee crisis’ must be framed within the process of Serbia’s accession to the European Union, which formally began in April 2008 with the signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA). Subsequently, Serbia introduced a number of legislative changes concerning asylum procedures and border management, including measures related to the right to asylum and temporary protection (Djurović et al., 2022; see also Chapter 3, this volume). Under the new legislation, all those arriving in Serbia at the height of the ‘refugee crisis’ who declared that they intended to seek asylum were entitled to an ‘identity card’ that allowed them to remain legally in the country for seventy-two hours. During this period, they were required to register at a reception centre, otherwise the legal basis for their stay would lapse (Kilibarda, 2016: 34). Many of those who stated their intention to apply for asylum during those years – mostly families with children – primarily did so to temporarily legalize their stay in the country and gain access to the state reception system, but without any genuine intention of remaining over the long term. Only a tiny proportion of these migrants subsequently went through with the identification process, and an even smaller number were granted protection (Bez nec et al., 2016: 36–37; Šantić, 2018).

In March 2016, following the definitive closure of the semi-formal ‘humanitarian corridor’ along the Balkan Route and the enforcement of the EU-Turkey Agreement,⁵ migrant arrivals in Serbia decreased drastically, although they did not stop altogether. Over the following months, the changed border regime meant that people-on-the-move all along the Balkan Route found themselves ‘trapped’ or at least delayed on their trajectory towards other parts of Europe to (IOM 2017: 7). In this new geopolitical context, a network of makeshift refugee camps began to emerge in Serbia – alongside the ‘formal’ camp archipelago mentioned above – often in or around logistically strategic cities, such as Belgrade or cities near the borders with Croatia (Šid and Sombor), Hungary (Sombor and Subotica), and later also with Bosnia and Herzegovina (Loznica) (Jordan & Minca, 2023a, 2023b; Minca & Collins, 2021). In the following sections, we examine the emergence of this network as a direct consequence of *both* the enforcement of new border regimes in the Balkans – particularly in Hungary and Croatia – *and* of the implicit, silent support provided by some non-EU states in the region to the informal movement of migrants towards the EU.

⁵ See <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-towards-a-new-policy-on-migration/file-eu-turkey-statement-action-plan>.



Source: UNHCR, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/89400> (Modified by the authors; permission obtained on 12 August 2024).

Figure 5.1 Reception centres and asylum centres in Serbia, 2016–2024

SERBIA AS A BUFFER ZONE (1): THE 'BELGRADE HUB' AND THE EPHEMERAL GEOGRAPHIES OF 'THE LIST' (2016–2020)

Thus, following an initial phase of 'accelerated mobility' while the above-mentioned humanitarian corridor remained open, from spring 2016 onwards, Serbia entered an extended period of reorganization of the Balkan Route. This period was marked by multiple phases and events that significantly changed the geographies of informal refugee mobility in the country. Developments during this time included: the construction of border fences; the definitive closure of the borders for people-on-the-move; the emergence of an archipelago of makeshift camps; diversions and rerouting of the corridor towards Bosnia and Herzegovina; and restrictions on mobility in response to the Covid-19 health emergency (see Collins et al., 2022; Facchini & Rondi, 2022: 39–81; Šantić & Antić, 2020). In practice, the slowdown in mobility of people-on-the-move beginning in 2016 prompted new strategies on the part of the government and new spatial tactics on the part of migrants and those helping them to undertake their perilous journeys (Carter-White & Minca, 2025).

The sum of these changes brought about a gradual shift in the role played by Serbia within the Balkan Route. More specifically, it went from being a de facto 'transit country' to an implicit 'buffer zone' where migrants were provided with humanitarian support but, at the same time, were also significantly slowed down by the new border regimes of neighbouring countries and across the EU more generally (on this see also Beznec et al., 2020). This change in Serbia's geopolitical role is clearly expressed in two key EU documents, the *New Pact on Migration and Asylum*, released by the European Commission in September 2020, and the *Commission staff working document: Serbia 2020*. The latter in particular recognized that

Serbia continued to significantly contribute, as a transit country, to the management of the mixed migration flows towards the EU by playing an active and constructive role and cooperating effectively with its neighbours and EU Member States. It also continued to effectively implement the integrated border management strategy and its action plan. (European Commission, 2020: 40)

To better understand how and why Serbia became a key geopolitical player in the development of the Balkan Route, it is useful to focus on the Serbian authorities' attempts to manage, facilitate, but also 'contain' the mobility of refugees via a specific geopolitics of camps (see Carter-White & Minca, 2025). These policies in turn elicited a response from the clandestine networks of smugglers, whose 'geographical imaginations' prompted them to continuously tweak refugee mobilities as a function of shifting political and infrastructural

conditions, leading to the establishment of an interconnected archipelago of informal camps across the country.

According to Milica Švabić of KlikAktiv, a local NGO,

the strengthening of controls by the Serbian police has resulted in the eviction of several informal camps in northern Serbia. These are demonstrative actions aimed at reassuring the local population, the general public, and European observers, while showcasing the Serbian government's security efforts to representatives of Frontex [the European Border and Coast Guard Agency]. Nevertheless, the entrenched presence of clandestine smuggling networks on the ground has quickly led to the formation of new makeshift camps at different locations and with different roles in supporting refugees mobilities [...] (Interviewed in Belgrade, 25 September 2023)

Undoubtedly, one of the defining moments in the emergence of a geography of informal camps in Serbia was the occupation, for a few months between 2016 and 2017, of a large urban squat in the centre of Belgrade (often referred to as 'the Barracks' and populated by about 2,000 migrants when we visited it in winter 2016–2017; see Figure 5.2). This site was located between



Source: Photo by the authors, December 2016.

Figure 5.2 Belgrade's 'Barracks' near the old railway station

the abandoned warehouses of the railway station and the well-known 'Afghan Park', the garden square opposite the Faculty of Economics, which officially bears the name of Belgrade University's greatest benefactor, the merchant Luka Čelović (Sofronijević, 1995: 259–278). From summer 2015, Afghan Park had been frequented by migrants as a place to socialize, buy food, receive humanitarian aid, and organize their onward journey to the northern border (Collins & Minca, 2024). However, following the closure of the humanitarian corridor, and especially after Hungary completed the wall along its border with Serbia, Afghan Park also became the best place to make contact with smugglers and set up informal border crossings along the Balkan Route (Minca et al., 2018: 452).

At that time, young Afghans and Pakistanis took refuge in dilapidated warehouses, creating makeshift bedding using cardboard, plastic sheeting, and bricks, and building improvised fires for cooking and warmth. They endured in this informal camp without basic services and at the limit of survival by reproducing multiple forms of social life, including a makeshift 'barber service' and improvised kitchens (Fieldnotes, January 2017; see also Collins & Minca, 2024; Minca & Collins, 2021; Seichter et al., 2020). Nonetheless, these migrants' condition of extreme marginalization, embedded in the interstitial spaces of Belgrade's urban fabric, helped them to prepare for 'the Game'. Despite the harsh living conditions, the Barracks offered freedom of movement and independence from the (perceived) constraints associated with welfare services and government camps (Umek & Minca, 2024a: 61; also, Collins & Minca, 2024). Long tolerated (and neglected) by the authorities, this prominent makeshift camp was only cleared by the police in May 2017, following public outcry sparked by a string of critical articles in foreign newspapers (MacDowall & Graham-Harrison, 2017; Specia, 2017). The rundown buildings were subsequently demolished to make way for the construction of the large-scale real estate development known as the Belgrade Waterfront (Wright, 2015; see also Obradović-Wochnik, 2018). Most of the migrants camping out in the Barracks were relocated – a move to which they put up some resistance – to a new reception centre in Obrenovac, a few kilometres from the capital (Politika, 2017; also, Collins & Minca, 2024).

In the course of our many interviews and informal exchanges with people-on-the-move and humanitarian workers at that time, we learned that the relative attractiveness and resilience of 'the Barracks' were linked to the broader 'camp (geo)politics' then being implemented by the Serbian authorities. Specifically, this consisted of a complex blend of facilitating the free movement of migrants by providing humanitarian aid and keeping the official camps 'open', while also adopting what might be described as a strategically lenient attitude towards the informal refugee settlements, with minimal interference in their internal dynamics (see Collins et al., 2022). It was during this

period that Serbia's geopolitical role as a 'buffer zone' along the Balkan Route began to emerge more clearly. In other words, Serbia had become a country where, due to multiple border closures on the part of the neighbouring countries and the impossibility for most migrants to continue their journey legally, an increasing number of people-on-the-move were technically stuck, waiting for the opportunity to cross the border 'illegally' (Rydzewski, 2020, 2023).

However, most of these people were registered as 'intending to apply for asylum' (without being obliged to do so) and were allowed to remain in the camp system set up by the Serbian authorities while theoretically awaiting their turn to be legally admitted to Hungary. From multiple conversations with authorities and humanitarian workers, we learned that the complicated system then regulating potential official entry into Hungary was based on a document informally known as 'the Hungarian waiting list' (Djurović et al., 2022: 26–28). And indeed, despite having built a double fence along its border with Serbia, in the first months after the concerted 'closure of the Route' by most of the Balkan countries, Hungary still allowed a limited number of people per day to enter its asylum system. According to Djurović et al. (2022: 28):

[To] ease the pressures on the Serbian reception system, enable the outflow of migrants from Serbia and to reduce tensions and migrants' discontent with local communities, Serbian authorities organized a mechanism of lists (called the 'Hungarian waiting list') for those willing to proceed toward Hungary, to claim asylum there and to avoid being push backed to Serbia. To get on the list, migrants needed to be registered in one of the temporary reception centres in Serbia and wait there for their turn (often for more than a year), to enter the Hungarian transit zone. The lists were compiled by the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (KIRS) but communicated [to] Hungarian border police via migrants/community leaders present at the border [...] with no official contact between the Hungarian and Serbian authorities on this matter.

These (few) individuals were only admitted on weekdays (Thursdays were apparently reserved for minors) at the two official entry points of Kelebija and Horgoš, near Subotica.

[...] Without any official communication between us [the authorities of the two countries], a day in advance normally [...] the Hungarian border authorities send us back this 'list' and the day after they read out the names of the people allowed to pass through the gates and to be considered for asylum procedures. (Interview with Commissariat representative, August 2016)

The 'list' was short-lived, however, as the number of persons taken in by Hungary was gradually reduced and ultimately, in 2020 due to the Covid-related restrictions, this possibility was permanently removed.

Nonetheless, while it lasted, this admission practice enabled a certain degree of circularity in migrant movements, with the support of the various Serbian reception centres along the northern border. These sites became functional to keeping the Balkan Route unofficially open and were strategic to crossing the Hungarian (and to some extent the Croatian) border. The 'list' was only the official reason for migrants to wait in the Serbian camps for their chance to attempt to 'go to Europe' (Minca et al., 2018). This also explains why the institutional camps always remained entirely 'open' and why the registration procedures were typically lenient (Collins et al., 2022). In other words, over time, the Serbian camp archipelago became an integral part of an informal geography of mobility. Despite anti-migrant rhetoric and the walls erected by some countries in the region (but not by Serbia), the Serbian camps contributed to keeping the Balkan Route alive in a different form, by helping migrants who had been rejected or literally pushed back by the border police of neighbouring countries. Ultimately, they reinforced Serbia's role as a buffer/waiting zone along this migration corridor (Minca et al., 2019: 52–55; Rydzewski, 2023: 82–86).

Crossing the northern borders became increasingly difficult as time went on, but certainly not impossible, as a robust network of smugglers began to emerge and establish itself in response to new regional geopolitical conditions and the associated border regimes (see also Augustová et al., 2021). At this point, the best and 'safest' way for most migrants to continue their journey was to avail themselves of the new informal branches of the Route coordinated by the smugglers. The latter's presence and operational capacity became a structural element of the Route, especially in Belgrade and the northern regions. Thus, new avenues of 'safe' passage were created along the borders of neighbouring countries, which had previously remained marginal among the Route's geographical variants. Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, played no role in the early stages of the humanitarian crisis stemming from the 'long summer of migration'; however, due to increasing violence by the Croatian border police, in 2018 it suddenly became a new destination as a 'bridge country' towards the EU. This generated a new front of informal refugee mobility on Serbian territory along the Drina River border as well as in Loznica, Banja Koviljača, and Mali Zvornik, towns that at different times all saw the emergence of urban squats or informal camps in 'jungles' (see Minca & Umek, 2020; Zocchi, 2024; also, Chapter 6 in this volume).

During this stage, the nature of the official reception system also evolved. The archipelago of camps set up by the Serbian authorities (but entirely funded by the EU) increasingly shifted away from being solely a means of providing humanitarian aid to people-on-the-move (although we would argue that the camps have always continued to offer support). Instead, they became more integral to Serbia's geopolitical role as a 'buffer zone' along the Balkan Route,

effectively serving as a key component of the EU's border externalization policy. This role gained strategic importance not only due to the constant presence of migrants in Serbian camps (whether stranded or having been returned there after being pushed back at the EU border), but also by virtue of how Serbian institutions have generally responded to the humanitarian crisis along the Balkan Route over time.

Indeed, since 2016, Serbia has exercised a sort of 'soft power' in its governance of informal migration in the region. First, by adopting an explicitly humanitarian approach, it has been far more willing than neighbouring countries (see Croatia, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania) to offer temporary hospitality to people-on-the-move. In addition, however, its network of camps and asylum centres has allowed the government to exert key forms of direct and indirect control over the informal mobility of migrants (for example, in some cases by transferring them to camps in the south or forcibly moving them from informal camps to formal camps). At the same time, aware of its strategic importance within the EU's broader migration and refugee policy, Serbia has implicitly been able to renegotiate its geopolitical position in Europe by 'containing' and 'delaying' migrants along the Route, or by reinforcing border control, albeit often via purely performative actions (Djurović et al., 2022; Minca et al., 2018; Župarić-Iljić et al., 2018).

In line with the new spatial configurations, the number of migrants transiting Serbia continued to increase over this phase, until the onset of the Covid-19 emergency gave rise to an entirely new geopolitical landscape (Šantić & Antić, 2020). According to UNHCR Serbia (2020), there were nearly 7,000 migrants present in the country in February 2020, of whom over 5,000 were being accommodated in formal camps. After the Serbian government declared a state of emergency due to the pandemic, the number of migrants hosted at these facilities increased even further, mainly as a result of the authorities' forced relocation of migrants who were outside the reception system, either from makeshift camps located near the border areas with Croatia and Hungary, or from squats, hostels, or private apartments in Belgrade and elsewhere. The subsequent decision to temporarily restrict all movement via the proclamation of a national lockdown (15 March 2020) inevitably also affected the residents of the asylum and reception centres, who were prohibited from leaving without special permission (see Collins et al., 2022). Consequently, in the months that followed, the total number of camp residents quickly rose to around 9,000 (UNHCR, 2020). Until the restrictions were eased in May 2020, this regime of immobility – which was also partially applied to the rest of the population, as in other European countries – inevitably led to a slowing down in new 'registered' arrivals, while a correspondingly larger number of migrants made themselves invisible by avoiding public spaces and resorting to makeshift accommodations in order to reduce the possibility of being

identified and transferred to camps (Šantić & Antić, 2020: 10). Although the pandemic did lead to an unavoidable slowing in migrant mobility until the restrictions were eased, its impact was less significant than might have been expected. As soon as the restrictions were lifted, the number of people-on-the-move entering Serbia from Bulgaria or North Macedonia increased. This shift also marked the beginning of yet another new phase in the geopolitics of migrant informal mobilities in the country, a phase that we shall now explore (HCIT [Humanitarian Centre for Integration and Tolerance], 2021: 7).

SERBIA AS A BUFFER ZONE (2): THE ‘SOMBOR HUB’ AND THE NEW INFORMAL GEOGRAPHIES OF THE NORTHERN BORDERSCAPES (2020–2023)

With the end of the public health emergency, and possibly as a result of the strengthening of the clandestine networks that supported migrant mobility throughout the severe lockdown period and the de facto sealing off camps across the country, a significant reconfiguration of the geographies of the Balkan Route in Serbia began to emerge from 2020 onwards. This reconfiguration involved the development of an increasingly more structured and inter-connected archipelago of informal camps in the north of the country, especially near the Hungarian border. These informal camps increasingly relied on the presence of the formal camps in the region, which the migrants often used in their efforts to continue their journey (Minca & Collins, 2021). As a result, the city of Sombor has emerged in recent years as a second key ‘transit hub’ along the Serbian leg of the Balkan Route. Specifically, it became a mandatory point of passage for those wishing to cross the Hungarian, but also the Croatian and even the Romanian borders. At the same time, this northern archipelago of formal and informal camps became crucial to the functioning of the entire Route through Serbia, serving as the main exit point for people-on-the-move aiming to continue their journey towards the Schengen area, especially via the Hungarian border (see IOM, 2020; also, Fieldnotes, May 2023).

Already during the previous phase described above, the northern cluster of official camps had included several state reception centres (in Subotica, Sombor, Kikinda)⁶ and two military stations/posts located near the border crossings of Kelebija-Tompa (on the outskirts of the city) and Horgoš-Röszke (on the A1 motorway). Here, the Commissariat had set up a small number of tents to facilitate the passage of migrants across the Hungarian border.

⁶ All camps were ‘open’, in the sense that technically anyone could enter and leave without major restrictions; indeed, many migrants were taken in temporarily without great formality.

Subotica and Sombor, on the other hand, had served as temporary reception centres where migrants waited for their turn to be allowed into Hungary as part of the quota system based on the abovementioned 'list' (Council of the European Union, 2017: 11). In addition to these official facilities, several informal 'jungle' camps formed in the countryside around Subotica and a makeshift camp was established in an 'old brick factory' a few hundred metres from the reception centre. With the elimination of the 'list', however, this cluster temporarily became less important, as the migration corridor largely shifted towards Croatia and, from 2018, Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, in the period immediately following the pandemic-related camp closures, smuggling networks successfully brought the northern Serbia border area back to the centre of their operations, leading its archipelago of camps, both official and unofficial, to assume new roles and functions.

To obtain a rough estimate of the number of migrants passing through Serbia during this later stage, we can consult data compiled by the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2024). According to their reports, over 120,000 migrants were registered in the reception system across the Western Balkan countries in 2021, over 190,000 in 2022, and over 160,000 in 2023. Given that most of the migrants we interviewed stated that they had spent time in Serbia during their journey, these (partial) figures provide some insight into the sheer scale of informal mobility in the country. Notably, no official data exist on the actual number of people crossing Serbia each year, as many travel undetected. According to the Commissariat, the vast majority of registrations in Serbia were reported from camps in the northern part of the country, especially those located in Sombor, Subotica, and Kikinda. The high concentration of migrants in this area is directly linked to the intensification of smuggling activities there, despite the presence of the Hungarian border fence and the deployment of high-tech devices to detect 'irregular' crossings along that border (see Korte, 2020, 2021). This also explains why the camps near the northern borders with Croatia and Hungary have often been overcrowded, experiencing high turnover since the end of the Covid restrictions (Fieldnotes, May 2023). Indeed, post-Covid, most of these camps were equipped to accommodate continuous new arrivals and were primarily open to those in need of immediate assistance. This included returnees who had previously left abruptly to attempt an irregular border crossing. These migrants often returned to the same camp or to other camps in the region after failing to cross the border or after being pushed back into Serbia by the Croatian or Hungarian police.

During our several visits to northern Serbia between 2021 and 2023, we also witnessed the consolidation of an extensive informal geography of makeshift camps near some of the key informal border crossings (for example, Horgoš, Kelebija, Majdan, and other locations in the northern border regions saw dozens of informal camps spring up) and at strategic points around the town of

Sombor, which by that time had become the main transit hub in the country for informal refugee mobility towards the European Union (EU). Another area with significant migrant presence and mobility emerged for a time near the so-called *Triplex Confinium* (triple border) between Serbia, Hungary, and Romania. More specifically, between 2020 and 2021, the villages of Rabe and Majdan saw the arrival of a large number of migrants seeking to cross the border into Romania and from there to enter Hungary, thus avoiding the infamous Hungarian double border fence.

While waiting to cross this triple border, people of various origins (Pakistanis, Afghans, Somalis, Syrians, Moroccans, etc.) occupied uninhabited houses in the village of Majdan for months at a time. Here they lived – without much conflict – in close proximity to the local community, which had long been experiencing depopulation as many younger residents moved to Hungary (Euronews, 2021). Along the road leading to the border, a squat staked out in an old agro-industrial plant, known as the ‘milk factory’ (see Figure 5.3), offered shelter to many of those preparing to attempt the next stretch of ‘the Game’ into Romania. Indeed, many that we spoke to at that time described a branch of the Route connecting Belgrade to Sombor to Subotica to Majdan and, finally, to Romania. The triple border site seemed emblematic of the (only apparent) contradictions that characterized the management of migrant mobility in this region: the high fence along the Hungarian border came to an abrupt end where it met the Serbian and Romanian border lines, along which there were no further barriers at all. For anyone visiting that unique place, the strong visual impact of the Hungarian double fence finishing right in front of the Serbian border police post on one side, and a dirt track heading into the Romanian countryside on the other, was difficult to dismiss.

The growing importance of Sombor as a hub and, more generally, of the archipelago of camps in the northern border region may be explained by two main factors. On the one hand, many migrants continued to resist registration and inclusion in the Serbian reception system, as this would have increased their chances of being transferred to camps that were more distant from the border, such as in Preševo, Tutin, or Sjenica. On the other hand, the smuggling networks continued to develop their capacity to systematically and effectively arrange for the transfer and accommodation of migrants outside the official reception system, guaranteeing them a ‘safe’ passage – even beyond the Hungarian border wall – in exchange for large sums of money.



Source: Photo by the authors, December 2021.

Figure 5.3 The 'milk factory' makeshift camp near the village of Rabe (Vojvodina)

Without a facilitator you could never travel that route. Amongst other reasons, because you don't know the way. [...] There were two walls, that is, two fences. Each time, I climbed over the fence. At the first fence, (the facilitators) placed a ladder on the Serbian side and another ladder on the Hungarian side. [...] Only one person accompanied us into Hungary, the other facilitators took the ladders back. [...] The facilitator brought taxis into which he loaded five people at a time. The taxi travelled across Hungary and dropped us off at the border with Austria. (Migrant from Afghanistan, 28, interviewed in Pashtu, Trieste, February 2023)

There were people who said they would go via Hungary and others who still wanted to go via Croatia, but it all depended on your economic resources. If you spent more money, you could go via Hungary, otherwise you went via Bosnia. (Migrant from Afghanistan, 30, interviewed in Pashtu, Trieste, August 2023)

Thus, during this protracted 'third' phase, which was destined to end abruptly in November 2023, Serbia represented a key strategic 'buffer zone' within the complex geopolitical context of the Balkan Route. This role was consolidated

over time via a combination of various (and often essential) forms of humanitarian intervention – primarily implemented via a specific camp policy – along with an implicit inclination to facilitate the informal mobility of migrants, with all the more reason because the latter did not intend to stay in the country in any case. Throughout this strategic phase, the camps served as ‘anchors’ for the Serbian leg of the Route (and, to a large extent, for its extensions beyond Serbia). Overall, these key sites have contributed to shaping an extensive informal geography of refugee mobility that has involved hundreds of thousands of people-on-the-move since 2015 (UNHCR, 2023).

CONCLUSIONS: CAMP CLOSURES AS GEOPOLITICS

Against an ever-changing geopolitical backdrop, Serbia has continued to play a central role in the management of migration to Europe via the Balkan Route, becoming one of the main geopolitical actors in the humanitarian aid policy developed by the EU (which has funded and continues to fund the official Serbian camps). Serbia has both implicitly facilitated the informal mobility of migrants towards EU member states and attempted to delay their arrival by tightening border controls and selectively relocating large groups of migrants to the south of the country, that is to say, away from the border regions (informal conversations with aid workers, 2023, 2024). This ambivalence in Serbian policy has served both overall EU policy agendas and those of the EU member states most directly involved in the Route (notably Austria, Croatia, and Hungary), mainly via the implementation of measures (including illegal practices such as border pushbacks) aimed at containing migrants in non-EU countries such as Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (KlikAktiv, 2024a: 12–18).

In a comprehensive analysis of Serbia’s role within this geopolitical context – conducted as part of an ASILE project focused on global asylum governance and the role of the EU – Djurović et al. (2022) suggest that Serbia’s ambivalence stems from its readiness to align Serbian law with EU asylum legislation, which in turn is driven by the country’s hopes of joining the EU in the near future (see also Djurović, 2024). However, faced with often conflicting policy objectives (humanitarian assistance versus ‘containment’ and ‘security’), Serbia has lately sought to minimize potential migratory pressure on its borders. It has achieved this by enhancing border controls (especially along the southern borders) and by forging agreements with Frontex (see Council of the European Union, 2024; Reuters, 2024) and with neighbouring countries⁷

⁷ For the 2022 Memorandum of Understanding between Hungary, Austria and Serbia see: <https://cdn.kormany.hu/uploads/sheets/4/40/401/401caa8f29ba9d15b989ae2be2b7ed9.pdf>

while still upholding a strong humanitarian approach, notably via the open camp policy described above.

According to the ASILE project report cited above, while the EU, through its funding strategies, has steadily increased the pressure on Serbia to combat 'irregular migration', it has at the same time partially alleviated this pressure by also funding humanitarian aid for the reception of migrants. However, because this funding has been structurally inadequate, the combination of containment and humanitarian approaches has resulted in ongoing instability and a latent humanitarian crisis. This in turn has created an opportunity for illegal and criminal interference (i.e., smuggler networks) in the management of informal migration (Djurović, 2024). At the same time, Serbia's relative lack of compliance with asylum system standards (both procedurally and in terms of the quality of reception, as frequently reported by various NGOs – see No Name Kitchen, 2024; KlikAktiv, 2024a, 2024b) and the limited prospects for economic and social integration that it offers, even now, have continued to drive migrants and asylum-seekers to move to other countries as quickly as possible.

In an earlier work (Umek et al., 2019), we outlined the various ways in which the strategic positioning and management of camps has also been driven by geopolitical imperatives, as in the case of the Preševo camp in the years immediately following the 'long summer of migration'. Likewise, the recent decision by the Serbian authorities to (temporarily) close most of the camps in the north of the country is also a response to new geopolitical imperatives. Having long played the role of buffer zone, as analysed in this chapter, Serbia decided in late 2023 to close down the main segments of the Route that, despite the double fence discussed above, previously allowed thousands of migrants to enter Hungary via its northern border regions every year.

According to Stevan Tatalović of InfoPark, a local NGO,

the passage through Hungary has become very expensive also because of the lack of support points represented in the past by government reception centres, now closed. Relying on smugglers for a safe 'taxi Game' can cost up to €10,000 but on the other hand you arrive in Austria very quickly. Moreover, all transit times through Serbia and North Macedonia have been greatly reduced. (Interviewed in Belgrade, 15 July 2024)

The event that set the scene for this change in policy on camp management and the presence of migrants along the Route was a shootout between rival groups of smugglers in Horgoš in October 2023. This incident prompted a large-scale police operation across the region, with the eviction of most makeshift camps, the closure of those run by the Commissariat (in particular in Subotica, Sombor, and Kikinda, but also in the Šid area), the arrest of smugglers, and the forced relocation of all migrants to other camps situated farther from the border. These actions clearly signal the beginning of a new 'phase' in Serbian

migration policy and a shift in the geopolitical role that this country intends to play in relation to the issue of migration in Europe.

In many respects, this new phase signals the end of the camp policy that for many years underpinned Serbia's role as a buffer zone on the Balkan Route. As we write, it appears that all migrants entering from the southern borders are to be redirected towards Bosnia and Herzegovina, while the delivery of more traditional humanitarian aid is mainly concentrated in the camps of Tutin and Sjenica, near the border with Montenegro. The renewed trilateral agreement with Austria and Hungary (The Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2023), as well as the new EU Pact for Migration and Asylum,⁸ appear to envisage a new role for Serbia as a key external 'hotspot'. This role reflects a new strategy for the externalization of the EU's borders and includes plans to set up identification and detention centres within Serbia.

From a geopolitical point of view, it was long in Serbia's interest to maintain an ambiguous stance by allowing some movement along the Route within its borders, while at the same time reassuring the EU and neighbouring countries that it would not let migrants through. Thus, it ostensibly continued to act as a 'filter' and 'buffer zone' within the broader regional context and vis-à-vis the Schengen border (see Carter-White & Minca, 2025). It is too early to say whether the new geopolitical role will be fully embraced by Serbia (and indeed by the EU) or whether, as in the past, a degree of ambivalence will prevail, allowing the Balkan Route to remain a significant informal migration corridor, with the simultaneous establishment of a few 'showcase' hotspots to satisfy the demands and official expectations of the EU. What we know at the time of writing is that around a thousand migrants are currently registered at Serbian camps, while, according to some local NGOs, an unknown number are invisibly crossing its territory to enter Bosnia and Herzegovina and, to a lesser extent, Croatia. How these new configurations of (increasingly invisible) migrant mobility and the new geopolitical imperatives mentioned above will affect the Balkan Route over the long term remains to be seen – they will certainly provide interesting material for future research on the political geographies of migration in this region at the heart of Europe.

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⁸ See European Council, 14/05/2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-migration-policy/eu-migration-asylum-reform-pact/>

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6. Camp geographies in Una-Sana Canton, Bosnia and Herzegovina (2018–2022)

Roberta Gentili, Claudio Minca and Yolanda Weima

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on how the interplay between the opening and closing of formal camps for migrants and the dissolution of the existing archipelago of makeshift camps in Una-Sana Canton, Bosnia and Herzegovina, impacted the camp geographies of this border region between 2018 and 2022. As noted by Minca and Umek (2020), Bosnia and Herzegovina received very few ‘irregularized’ migrants during the humanitarian emergency of 2015 and 2016, during which nearly a million people moved through the Balkan region towards Western Europe. However, from the end of 2017, the country began to experience a substantial increase in arrivals, leading to a humanitarian crisis, particularly in the northwestern Una-Sana Canton, where a significant number of refugees gathered within a few months, waiting for the opportunity to cross the Croatian border and enter the European Union (EU) (Ibid.).

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Bosnian Ministry for Security recorded that ‘24,067 migrants and refugees’ entered Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2018 (n.d.). These people-on-the-move began arriving in Tuzla and Sarajevo first, followed by the cities of Bihać and Velika Kladuša in Una-Sana Canton. Initially, they stayed in parks or abandoned buildings in city centres and received informal assistance from local residents, who provided food and other forms of support, especially to families with children (see Helms, 2023; Hromadžić, 2019). Soon after, the northern border of Bosnia and Herzegovina was recognized by international humanitarian organizations as integral to a new major branch of the Balkan Route, with Una-Sana Canton becoming a leading transit point for people-on-the-move preparing to attempt the so-called ‘Game’ – a term used by migrants to

characterize ‘informal attempts to cross the EU border by walking through forests, crossing rivers, climbing border fences, jumping on trains, hiding in trucks, or procuring taxi services through smugglers’ (Minca & Collins, 2021: 2; see also Chapter 1, this volume).

Thus, academic research on the role of the Una-Sana Canton in the Balkan Route has examined the ways in which ‘the Game’ shapes refugee and migrant geographies and experiences (Minca & Collins, 2021; see also Augustová et al., 2023b; Zocchi, 2024), the related emergence of a network of makeshift camps (Jordan & Minca, 2023a; Minca & Umek, 2020), and the systematic pushbacks perpetrated by the Croatian border police, including the racialized violence that has characterized what many describe as the ‘EU border regime’ (Augustová, 2021, 2023a; Davies et al., 2023; Isakjee et al., 2020; Zocchi, 2023). The literature has also discussed the establishment of the first camps, the precarious living conditions in the reception centres, and the challenges faced by migrants, including the inadequate accommodation facilities, especially at some of the semi-formal camps (Minca & Collins, 2021; Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020). Other themes explored include the role of United Nations (UN) agencies on the ground in the area, the relationship between informal migration in this region and the EU’s management of its external borders (Ahmetašević & Mlinarević, 2019; Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020), the impact of solidarity networks (Hameršak, 2021; Zocchi, 2023), and ‘local perspectives’ on the presence of migrants in the canton (Helms, 2023; Hromadžić, 2020a). However, less attention has been devoted to the closure of formal camps and the demolition of informal camps in the region, especially in the years following the Covid-19 pandemic, and how these interventions have led to a radical reconfiguration of formal and informal migrant geographies in Bihać and Velika Kladuša in particular.

Hence, in dialogue with the recent literature on the camp geographies of the Balkan Route in this part of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the chapter discusses how key decisions related to the closure (and in some cases, opening) of camps in the Una-Sana Canton have dramatically impacted the presence and visibility of people-on-the-move in this border region, while crucially redefining their informal mobilities and associated spatialities. To this end, we outline the camp geographies that characterized the initial increase in the arrival of migrants from the Balkan Route in 2018, before analysing the subsequent emergence of an archipelago of formal and informal camps. The remainder of the chapter examines the authorities’ decision to systematically close, evict, or demolish nearly all camps located in urban areas (with the exception of a camp for minors and families), while simultaneously relocating all single adult male migrants to a camp opened in a remote area near Bihać. These decisions have categorically changed the camp geography of this key region for the Balkan Route.

The following pages are the outcome of extensive fieldwork carried out by the first author in the cities of Bihać and Velika Kladuša since late 2022, multiple visits to the region by the second author since 2018, and preliminary research in Bosnia and Herzegovina by the third author from autumn 2023. More specifically, the first author spent five months in the field across 2023 and 2024, conducting extensive participant observation in formal camps, make-shift camps, and the main gathering places for migrants in the two cities, and completed forty-two semi-structured interviews with people-on-the-move – including young single men, single women, and families – as well as humanitarian workers, non-governmental organization (NGO) staff working at transit centres, local authorities, activists, and volunteers. The first author has also built on her extensive prior experience of living and working in Bihać since 2019, and the networks and contextual knowledge she has formed over several years. The interviews with migrants and refugees were conducted anonymously, while other participants were given the opportunity to choose whether to remain anonymous. Most of the interviews focused on the development of the local camp system over time, and the impact of the closure of individual camps on formal and informal refugee geographies in the canton.

THE NEW BALKAN ROUTE AND THE ARCHIPELAGO OF ‘TEMPORARY RECEPTION’ CAMPS

In Bihać, the presence of individual refugees was initially somewhat scattered. In July 2018, approximately 200 people were allowed to stay in the Dom Penzionera, a dilapidated, unfinished building in the city centre once intended to become a retirement home (Hromadžić, 2020b). Later, when Mayor Šuhret Fazlić declared that the retirement home was unsafe, this group was transferred to the Borići student dormitory, an informal camp on the outskirts of Bihać (Vladislavljević, 2018). The informal Borići camp was initially set up in an empty building that had been abandoned for years. Its windows and doors were missing; the interior was covered in graffiti, the roof was in disrepair, and the concrete floor was riddled with holes that accumulated rainwater (Boitiaux, 2018).

In Velika Kladuša, the local population initially displayed empathy towards the refugees and strove to help by donating clothes, soap, and other needed items, or hosting children and families in their private homes. There were also multiple instances in which restaurant or café staff did not charge refugees who were evidently injured or in need (Augustová, 2020). At the same time, people-on-the-move were finding refuge in a relatively large semi-makeshift camp in Trnovi (see Figure 6.1). The use of this site – on a plot of land near the Croatian border that had previously housed a boarding kennel for dogs – and the pitching of tents there was approved by the authorities. The residents of this



Source: Photos by C. Minca, July 2018.

Figure 6.1 The Trnovi Camp, Velika Kladuša

semi-improvised camp queued each morning to use makeshift showers set up by volunteers (Augustová et al., 2023b). The camp served as a temporary shelter for migrants preparing to attempt to cross the border into Croatia, in some cases having walked for days or weeks through forests and mountains to reach the border area (Ibid.). Some of these individuals had already been pushed back several times by the Croatian border police (Ibid.). Indeed, within a few months of 2018, in response to the increase of arrivals in Bosnia, the Croatian authorities shifted their focus to the Bosnian border. They adopted the same strategies they had previously used on the border with Serbia, including militarizing the border and frequently pushing border crossers back into Bosnia and Herzegovina (Human Rights Watch, 2018). As early as July 2018, Croatia received EU funding for additional border surveillance resources – including control towers, thermal imaging cameras, drones, and helicopters – to assist with these interception operations (O'Reilly, 2022).

The initial insufficiency of formal reception centres in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2018 made registering and counting people-on-the-move challenging and prone to imprecision (Minca & Umek, 2020). Nevertheless,

nearly 25,000 new arrivals were registered by the Bosnian government in 2018 (IOM, n.d.). Between July and October 2018, four temporary reception centres (TRCs) were finally established in Una-Sana Canton (Ahić & Halilović Kibrić, 2023). According to an employee of a UN agency involved in their opening, ‘the primary objective of these centres was to accommodate individuals, register them, issue identity cards, and provide NFIs’ (interviewed in Bihać, 2023).

The first official camp in Una-Sana Canton was the TRC Sedra in Cazin (see Figure 6.2), a few kilometres from the town of Bihać. It was opened by IOM on 25 July 2018 (UNCT Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2018) in cooperation with the Ministry of Security and the Service for Foreigners’ Affairs (SFA), as well as other humanitarian partners. The ‘Sedra camp’ was set up to house families and unaccompanied minors and had a maximum capacity of 450. Sedra was a recently closed hotel originally built during the Yugoslav era, and now rented from a private individual by IOM (Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020). A few months after the Sedra camp was established, IOM opened another facility in Velika Kladuša, the TRC Miral, by repurposing a former PVC door factory located



Source: Photo by R. Gentili, October 2023.

Figure 6.2 *The abandoned TRC Sedra, Cazin*

a few kilometres from the Croatian border. This new camp was specifically designed for single men and unaccompanied minors, with a capacity of 700 people (Delauney, 2019).

Given the uptick in arrivals and the associated shortage of accommodation for single men, in October 2018 IOM decided to open an additional TRC in a former refrigerator factory in Bihać (Šantić et al., 2022), which had the capacity to accommodate up to 1,500 men and unaccompanied minors. The factory was originally built in 1982 as a production plant for Bira, a Gorenje Group company (Zocchi, 2022). In 2015, the company went bankrupt, and the building fell out of use. Initially, the camp consisted mainly of large tents located inside the factory, each housing up to 200 people. Later, containers were added. As described by Minca and Umek (2020: 5), 'the situation inside "Bira", [...] is that of another "city within a city", with a large waiting population, with barbershops and makeshift food stalls, and with a separate section for women and minors'. Unaccompanied minors were housed in 'Zone F', which was marked off and accessible only to dedicated humanitarian organizations. Under certain circumstances, particularly before the establishment of the official Borići camp, the site also housed families with children when there was no room for them at TRC Sedra. As a result of the constant pushbacks by the Croatian border police, many people-on-the-move remained in Bira for long periods of time, in some cases for an entire year (Zocchi, 2024).

The Bira camp was characterized by constant darkness and a lack of natural light due very few windows. Its architecture, typical of factories of this kind, made it difficult for the residents to distinguish between day and night. Overall, the living conditions were uncomfortable and unsanitary for those staying there:

At first, the situation at Bira was not good at all, but it was definitely better than [at] Borići. In the area dedicated to single men, people were sleeping on the floor, on carpets, and we had some blankets. Some people slept in the mosque; we slept wherever we could find space. The problem was that there were so many people, and the competent organizations didn't know how to manage the situation. There was one doctor, and every day at least 50 people were in line. The problems were various: skin problems, bacterial infections, scabies, fever. They didn't know how to handle the situation because people were coming back from the 'Game' in dirty clothes after having slept in the jungle. Eventually, they started managing the quarantine after the Game. (Migrant from Pakistan, interviewed online in June 2024)

Following the opening of TRCs Sedra, Miral, and Bira, in January 2019, the old student dormitory 'Borići', which had long been informally occupied by migrants, was renovated by IOM and officially opened as a temporary reception centre to accommodate women, families, and minors (UNCT Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2019b). It is worth noting that TRCs have only been established

within the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina,¹ and specifically in two cantons: Una-Sana Canton in the northwest of the country, and Sarajevo Canton (Gadžo-Šašić & Repovac Nikšić, 2022). Although the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy confirmed on several occasions that the funds provided by the EU to strengthen migration management capacities were intended to be used throughout the country and not only in selected areas (Ahić & Halilović Kibrić, 2023), the authorities in the Republika Srpska officially rejected the establishment of TRCs on their territory, claiming that they lacked the capacity to provide adequate accommodation and assistance to people-on-the-move (Klix, 2018).

Most migrants initially arrived at these camps with so-called ‘police papers’, which were documents stating their ‘intention to apply for asylum’. These papers were valid in Bosnia and Herzegovina for fourteen days before an actual application for asylum was filed. Many received these documents from the SFA in Tuzla, or other field offices, after crossing into Bosnia from Serbia (Šantić et al., 2022). Indeed, those seeking access to transit centres were required to register first with the SFA Office and then with IOM, a process that included health screening and possible quarantining or medical treatment. They were then allocated accommodation and issued with a camp identity card, which was used to enter and exit the camp and to receive food, clothing, and non-food items (NFIs) (Ibid.).

The archipelago of camps established in 2018 significantly changed the situation of people-on-the-move in Una-Sana Canton, especially in the cities of Bihać and Velika Kladuša, which had now become key refugee hubs along this new branch of the Balkan Route. However, the following year, with the increased arrival of new migrants, many other urban spaces in these cities were also occupied, often leading to hostile interactions with the local population (Ahmetašević, 2020; Helms, 2023). According to Lidija Skalić, a former member of the Red Cross,

Already in 2018, [a] few locals began to protest saying that they don’t [sic] want to have migrants walking on their streets because they claimed to be afraid of them. Some people created a picture of migrants in their minds that was not true; probably it was also [the] media’s fault. I remember that one day we [had] just finished our shift in Borići camp and some locals came in front of [the camp] starting the protest and throwing eggs on us. (Interviewed in Bihać, May 2023)

In 2019, the presence of migrants in the canton reached unprecedented levels. Despite the opening of the four aforementioned TRCs, there were not enough

¹ Bosnia and Herzegovina is divided into two entities – the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska – and one district, Brčko.

places to accommodate the growing number of people-on-the-move through the region, many of whom began to reside in private or makeshift accommodation (Nezirović et al., 2021). According to SFA, ‘the influx of migrants in Bosnia-Herzegovina increased by over 100% in the first two months of 2019’ (Izmirlić, 2020, translated from Bosnian). Reports (UNCT Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2019a), meanwhile, stated that over 29,000 people-on-the-move were registered in the country in 2019. Other reports (see Manzin, 2018) estimated that, at one point, there were about 10,000 people in the region waiting for an(other) opportunity to cross the border (see Minca & Umek, 2020: 24). The situation thus became increasingly precarious for many and led to multiple incidents with the local authorities or the border police. For example, in October, a large group of migrants attempted to force their way across the border and remained stuck in a kind of no-man’s-land for a few days (Ibid.).

During these months, migrants were visibly present in the centres of both Bihać and Velika Kladuša at all times, while many camped informally outside the TRC Bira when it was declared full by the management. A potential humanitarian emergency was already latent, accompanied by growing hostility from the local population towards the prolonged presence of thousands of young men from Asia in the public spaces of the two cities – a presence that appeared to further exacerbate the perception of social and political marginalization among those living in the canton (Ahmetašević, 2020; Helms, 2023, 2024). In response to this precarious and potentially unsustainable situation, a shift in the local authorities’ attitude towards the presence of migrants, and related tensions with the central government in Sarajevo over the management of these people-on-the-move, led to plans in 2019 to remove migrants from the urban centres. As we shall see in the next section, this new strategy was based on a specific camp politics and an associated spatial strategy.

CAMP CLOSURE: DISPERSING AND INVISIBILIZING MIGRANTS

As noted by Minca and Weima (Chapter 1, this volume), archipelagos of camps are often managed by authorities through a series of strategic openings and closures, with camp closures serving as a key element in the spatial management of migration (see also Weima & Minca, 2022). Therefore, the opening and closing of formal camps, along with the eviction and destruction of makeshift camps, should be thoroughly investigated to assess the impact of these interventions on people-on-the-move and their associated spatialities. Indeed, state or local authorities can decide to close certain camps and relocate residents to alternative, more distant facilities with the aim of containing, delaying, or sometimes even blocking migrants’ mobility.

This was the case in Una-Sana Canton when, in 2020, two camps were closed and their residents, together with new arrivals, were either relocated elsewhere or left without accommodation (Minca & Umek, 2020). Already in mid-June 2019, based on a decision by Bihać City Council and the Cantonal Operational Group² set up for ‘the coordination and supervision of the migrant crisis’, hundreds of migrants living outside reception centres – primarily in informal camps, parks, and private accommodation – were relocated to Vučjak. This site, an abandoned landfill located approximately 10 kilometres from Bihać and 8 kilometres from the Croatian border, became a new camp on land contaminated with toxic waste (Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020). The EU and UN agencies, including IOM, immediately rejected the choice of Vučjak as a place for people to stay, refusing to assist in this operation (Ibid.). IOM in particular stated that,

Vučjak poses a significant health and safety risk and is currently not equipped to accommodate migrants and refugees according to international standards [...] The area is also near minefields. There is a significant fire hazard due to the possible presence of methane underground, given that the site was previously a landfill. (Izmirić, 2020; translated from Bosnian)

Accordingly, Vučjak has been defined as a ‘semi-formal’ camp, blurring the distinction between formal/institutional and makeshift camps (Minca, 2022). Although the land was allocated by the state, and there were police stationed in a container at the entrance, the services offered were minimal. The Red Cross provided food – breakfast and lunch – twice a day in a large white tent, while residents lived in tents offered by the Turkish Red Crescent (Pozniak, 2022). Water was available only for a few hours a day, and most people used the forest as a latrine.

In an interview with Harun Emrulović, a manager with the Red Cross mobile team in Bihać, it emerged that:

We also provided migrants with first aid at the camp; sometimes the local doctor from the Bihać hospital would come to Vučjak, but then he stopped coming, and some volunteers, even international ones, from other organizations started to arrive, providing support – not medical support, but more basic things like wound dressings. There were only six of us from the Red Cross working at the camp. We provided lunch, and in this way, we could count how many migrants were in the camp. The number varied from 400 to over 1,000. Very often, the police would pick

² ‘The Operational Group of the Una-Sana Canton is a local body tasked with coordinating responses to the ongoing migration situation, working to manage the response to migrants in the region through policy and operational measures’ (see UNCT Bosnia & Herzegovina, 2019c).

people up on the streets in Bihać and force them to march to Vučjak in large groups. (Interviewed in Bihać, May 2023)

Vučjak was known as the 'Jungle Camp' among people-on-the-move, given that it was essentially a designated area in the forest (Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020). While residents were allowed to leave the camp, those intercepted by the police were stopped and at times forced to walk kilometres back to Vučjak, escorted by one or more police cars. During these months, it was common to see groups of migrants sitting by the roadside under the supervision of the police, who were waiting to gather more people to lead back to Vučjak (Faktor, 2019; Janjevic, 2019; Interview with Marine Corre in Bihać, June 2023). In the autumn of 2019, conditions in Vučjak deteriorated as the number of residents reached around 2,000 (Save the Children, 2019). In early December, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, paid an official visit to the camp, after which she was reported to have strongly condemned the conditions in which its residents were forced to live: 'The conditions here are not for human beings [...] This camp should be shut down' (MacGregor, 2019). On some occasions, camp residents refused food and water to protest the dire living conditions. On 11 December 2019, the Vučjak camp was officially closed, and the residents were transferred to TRCs in Sarajevo and to the Salakovac Refugee Reception Centre (RRC) near Mostar (Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020; Save the Children, 2019).

The establishment of the Vučjak camp on the site of a former landfill critically highlighted the deliberate neglect and abandonment that can be suffered by migrants. Davies et al. (2017) would define this as a form of 'hidden violence of abandonment', where harm is not inflicted directly but rather via a systematic failure to provide necessary care and protection. The Vučjak camp experience also illustrates how structural violence operates by perpetuating harmful living conditions, thereby normalizing the suffering of people-on-the-move by virtue of what amounts to a 'refugee ban', characterized by institutional neglect and calculated inaction (Minca, 2022). The opening of the camp served to divert people from other makeshift camps and private accommodation throughout the canton, and especially served to move them away from the city of Bihać. This had the ambivalent effect of rendering people-on-the-move less visible in certain spaces, while simultaneously creating a precarious camp that became increasingly visible over time to journalists, activists, and other key actors, including the Human Rights Commissioner.

In October 2019, prior to the closure of the Vučjak camp, the Una-Sana Canton's Operational Group for the coordination and supervision of the migrant crisis urged the cantonal authorities to identify alternative locations for the camp. In November 2019, the municipality of Bihać allocated a plot of land in Lipa – a site removed from any urban centre – as the only suitable

municipally owned location for a new TRC. This relocation of camp residents to a facility away from the city had long been advocated by the local authorities in Bihać, who were also opposed to keeping the TRC Bira open as recommended by IOM and the central government. This opposition stemmed largely from protests by Bihać residents at the gates of the Bira camp (Montalto Monella & Lucchesi, 2021).

The first Lipa camp was an emergency tent camp (ETC) with the capacity to host up to 1,000 single men. It was managed by IOM and officially opened on 21 April 2020 as a response to the Covid-19 emergency. The camp, which lacked running water, relied on a tank with pumps and diesel generators for its electrical power supply. Living conditions for those confined there were widely condemned as inhumane and degrading (Human Rights Watch, 2021). In March 2020, with the worldwide outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Security announced that Bosnia and Herzegovina was considering plans to close its borders. The pandemic prompted a state of emergency, resulting in the lockdown of formal camps and protests across the city of Bihać against the presence of migrants and camps in the canton (see Mustafić, 2020; Radio Sloboda Evropa, 2020; UNCT Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2020a, 2020b). These protests marked the beginning of a new phase characterized by the gradual closure of transit centres in urban Bihać and Velika Kladuša.

Protests also intensified in response to the proliferation of informal camps that year (Helms, 2023, 2024). During the initial Covid-related restrictions and border closures in spring 2020, people-on-the-move who were unable to access the overcrowded formal reception facilities or deliberately seeking to avoid them found shelter in makeshift camps. The presence of informal camps therefore significantly increased in the region, coming to host an estimated 3,000 people across over 250 locations (see Arnautović, 2020; Danish Refugee Council, 2020; Dumont, 2021). The number of residents at the Dom Penzionera building, for instance, rose to approximately 250 during the Covid-19 pandemic (Hrustanović, 2021). In parallel, another makeshift camp, located near the Bira camp and known as 'Krajina Metal', began to be occupied by people-on-the-move in the spring of 2020 (Arnautović, 2020; Dumont, 2021). In an interview, Radovan Klepić, a local resident who had worked as a chemist at the now-defunct Krajina Metal factory, explained that:

Krajina Metal was a steel factory that opened in the 1970s. It was one of the largest steel factories in the area, providing employment for approximately 4,000 people. However, the factory was closed immediately after the war and, despite its importance for the local economy, it never reopened following the privatization process. (Interviewed in Bihać, August 2024; translated from Bosnian)

For over a year, Krajina Metal remained one of the largest makeshift camps in Bihać. At the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, it housed over 400 individuals, mainly from Afghanistan, with the support of local organizations and small networks of activists who distributed food and firewood there during the winter (Arnautović, 2020; Dumont, 2021).

Despite the Covid-19 outbreak and the related border closure measures, people-on-the-move continued to arrive from the Route, increasingly finding themselves stranded in Una-Sana Canton (Amnesty International, 2021; Danish Refugee Council, 2020). In 2020, amidst the state of emergency that had been declared across Bosnia and Herzegovina, key decisions concerning camps were made. Although these moves were intended to be temporary, they appear to have become permanent in practice, with consequences that have endured over the intervening years.

As stated by a member of the Assembly of the Canton:

The Lipa camp started [out] as an emergency camp, and it is possible that, at some point, the idea of its long-term existence or transformation into a permanent camp was considered. This could be the result of changes in the dynamics of the migration crisis and accommodation needs. There was a perceived need for gradual cohesion with the local population. This might imply that the authorities wanted to avoid a sudden and potentially negative reaction from the local population, which could have occurred if it had been stated from the outset that the camp would become permanent. (Interviewed in Bihać, 2023)

A few months later, on 30 September 2020, amid protests by migrants and humanitarian organizations, TRC Bira was also shut down and many of its residents were transferred to Lipa, some 30 kilometres from the city centre (Arnautović, 2020; UNCT Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2020c). This closure of one of the largest camps along the Balkan Route at the time was the first of several similar operations that were to permanently alter migrant and refugee geographies in the town of Bihać and throughout Una-Sana Canton.

The closure of Bira was a process, which we could call an 'organizational session' by the government. Initially, with a decision made by the Skupština Canton (Cantonal Parliament), it was announced that Bira would be in lockdown, and from that moment on, no one could enter or leave Bira. But how do you explain to people that they could not go to the market or anywhere else? It was like being in a prison. Then, they allowed them to go to the Game. Only a certain number of people per day. However, if they were pushed back, they would not be allowed back into the camp. So, if a certain number of migrants left the camp every day, at some point the camp would become emptier and emptier day by day. After the summer of 2020, there were about 500 migrants in Bira, which led the authorities to decide that it was the right time to close the camp. (UN agency staff, interviewed in Bihać, 2023)

However, the Lipa camp, intended to accommodate people transferred from Bira, was already operating beyond its capacity (UNCT Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2020c). As a result, many migrants became stranded just outside the Lipa facility, where they were forced to remain for several days (Arnautović, 2020; Sharma, 2020). According to Silvia Maraone, Director of IPSIA BiH, an Italian NGO operating in Bihać since 2018,

When Bira was closed and migrants were transferred to Lipa, the latter camp was unsuitable for the upcoming autumn and winter seasons. Meanwhile, IOM repeatedly issued emergency appeals for the closure of Lipa, stating that the conditions there were unliveable and would expose residents to dangerously low temperatures. (Interviewed in Bihać, 2023; translated from Italian)

In keeping with this position, IOM strongly condemned the local authorities' decision to close Bira, arguing that the Lipa camp was not only not ready but also ill-equipped to withstand the region's extreme winter temperatures (Sharma, 2020). They urged the central government to identify a suitable alternative (Zocchi, 2022). On 7 December 2020, the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, expressed similar concerns in a letter to Bosnia and Herzegovina's Minister of Security, Selmo Cikotić, and to the President of its Council of Ministers, Zoran Tegeltija (Mijatović, 2020). In particular, Mijatović highlighted the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Una-Sana Canton, noting that a year after the closure of the Vučjak camp in December 2019, another crisis was emerging due to the severely substandard living conditions in the Lipa tent camp, which lacked electricity and running water and was overcrowded following the transfer of residents from Bira. She underlined the humanitarian consequences of closing down Bira and banning new admissions to Miral camp, actions that had left hundreds of migrants, including families with children, without shelter, food, and medical care (Ibid.).

In light of this situation, IOM announced the permanent closure of the Lipa camp, despite the lack of alternatives for accommodating migrants (Kovacevic, 2020a). On 23 December 2020, ETC Lipa was officially shut down due to its unsuitability for winter conditions (Assessment Capacities Project [ACAPS], 2021; IOM, 2021a). However, during this process, a massive fire erupted, destroying the camp. Consequently, all humanitarian workers had to evacuate from the site, leaving the former residents stranded around the remnants of the camp. In an interview, a former resident of Lipa recounted that:

The tent next to mine caught fire, but none of us were there at the time. Some organizations blamed migrants for starting the fire, but that wasn't true. IOM was in the process of evacuating the camp, and when the fire broke out, we were already outside. The entire camp was empty. How could migrants have started a fire inside? Why would we set fire to our own sleeping place? [...] After the fire, we had to sleep

in the jungle for 15 days. It was very hard. We had no food and no proper place to sleep. I built a shelter myself, and 35 of us slept there. We didn't have permission to go to Bihać, so we were stuck in the jungle. We had to shower with cold water from a small waterfall downhill from Lipa camp. (Migrant from Pakistan, interviewed in Bihać, July 2024)

With the destruction of Lipa, the humanitarian situation for migrants in Bosnia and Herzegovina deteriorated dramatically, while activists, volunteers, photographers, and journalists flocked to Bihać to cover the events. Accordingly, Una-Sana Canton began to receive international media attention, as had happened the previous year over the situation at Vučjak (Zocchi, 2023). On 29 December 2020, state authorities attempted to transfer all residents from Lipa to Bradina, a former military barracks in the municipality of Konjic, 45 kilometres from Sarajevo (Al Jazeera, 2020; ANSA, 2021). In an interview conducted in the autumn of 2023 with an employee of a humanitarian organization that had been operating in TRCs in the Una-Sana Canton in 2020, it emerged that the initial plan had been to transport fifteen busloads of migrants to Bradina. However, when the local population in Bradina began protesting this decision, the buses were rerouted (interviewed in Bihać, 2023). In addition, the Republika Srpska continued to deny any form of cooperation. After 24 hours on the buses, the migrants were brought back to Lipa (Al Jazeera, 2020). Their attempts to return to Bihać were, however, systematically blocked by police in the environs of Ripač (BVMN, 2021a; Kovacevic, 2020a).

On 30 December 2020, the central government finally decided that Lipa should be transformed into an official reception centre, with state authorities responsible for its management and IOM providing technical and financial support through funding received from the European Union (IOM, 2021a). At this point, as many as 900 people were still stranded on the site of the former ETC Lipa without access to basic services and adequate accommodation (ACAPS, 2021; Oddone, 2021). Many began living in makeshift camps in the surrounding forest, where they were fully exposed to winter weather conditions. Some went on hunger strike, demanding a dignified accommodation solution with immediate effect (Bierbach, 2021). All in all, the closure of Lipa further reinforced the 'ban' on these migrants by stranding them at the site of the formal camp and failing to provide alternative forms of accommodation locally.

In January 2021, groups of local residents in Bihać continued to gather outside the former Bira camp to oppose the possible re-opening of the facility. All efforts by the national government to compel Bihać City Council to relocate people from the Lipa camp to Bira were therefore met with resistance and were ultimately unsuccessful (Al Jazeera, 2020; Bierbach, 2021; Kovacevic, 2020b). In the absence of a viable solution to provide adequate facilities for the approximately 1,000 displaced individuals, the central government deployed

the army to set up an improvised camp in Lipa, consisting of twelve military tents, each capable of accommodating up to twenty people (Oddone, 2021). This provisional camp was directly managed by the SFA, which took over the administration of Lipa in collaboration with IOM. Finally, in November of that year, a new Lipa camp was inaugurated, with a capacity of 1,500, including designated spaces for families and unaccompanied minors.

Overall, the closure of the Bira camp marked the initial phase of a broader strategy aimed at eliminating the archipelago of camps in urban areas, which had been accommodating thousands of people-on-the-move since 2018. The goal of these closures was to diminish the visibility of irregularized migrants in Una-Sana Canton, effectively bringing an end to the protests and anti-migrant movements that had defined the summer of 2020 (Klix, 2020). However, this strategy also necessitated dismantling the existing archipelago of informal camps, a process that we shall explore in the next section.

In April 2022, the Ministry of Security instructed IOM and SFA to also halt the registration and reception of new arrivals at TRC Miral and to initiate the transfer of Miral residents to Lipa by 1 May. Officially, this decision was based on the observed decrease in migratory arrivals through Bosnia and Herzegovina and the availability of unused capacity at Lipa (Ministry of Security, 2022). The Ministry emphasized the urgency of closing the Miral camp and the need to relocate migrants outside the municipality of Velika Kladuša and other urban areas in order to enhance security for local citizens (Alagić, 2022). The Miral camp held significant strategic importance due to its geographical location, as it was the only camp in Velika Kladuša. Most migrants began their journeys to cross the Croatian border from this area, favoured for its flat terrain. With the closure of Miral, its residents were forcibly transferred to the newly established Lipa camp, in accordance with the Ministry's operational guidelines.

THE END OF THE ARCHIPELAGO OF INFORMAL CAMPS

As noted earlier, informal camps had been present in Una-Sana Canton since 2018, despite frequent evictions (and some closures) by local authorities. In 2021, with the establishment of a semi-permanent camp managed by the SFA in Lipa and the construction work of the new Lipa reception centre underway, the authorities set out not only to complete the closure of the remaining facilities located in the main cities but also to continue evicting and dismantling all informal camps in urban areas, with the relocation of their residents to Lipa.

As observed above, makeshift camps in Bihać and Velika Kladuša became particularly overcrowded during the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic, as the formal camps reached full capacity and many people sought refuge in the 'jungle', abandoned buildings, or old factories. For example, Ali (pseudonym),

a migrant from Pakistan, was denied re-access to Bira during the pandemic and was forced to shelter in a makeshift camp in the city:

I spent about a year at Bira. During Covid if you [went] to the Game and [were] pushed back, you had three days to return. One of the last times I went to the Game, I was pushed back from Slovenia, and when I returned to Bira, they did not allow me to enter, saying that I had three days to come back and that they had already expired. It was difficult because I slept outside. Then I went to Dom Penzionera, where I found a small room, I cleaned it, made a fire, and managed to spend my nights there. One day, I went to find a supermarket to buy some bread, and the police arrived and beat me. They told me that I could not go out after 6 pm. I was in the camp when the pandemic started and did not know about the curfew. During [my] time at Dom Penzionera, Bosnian people were very kind and helped us a lot. Some local activists brought us food and wood for the fire. (Migrant from Pakistan, interviewed in Bihać, August 2024)

During this period, Krajina Metal and Dom Penzionera remained the largest makeshift camps in Bihać. In Velika Kladuša, a tented area informally dubbed ‘the Helicopter’ was a further key informal site used by people-on-the-move (BVMN, 2021b: 6). The police and the SFA frequently cleared these spaces, relocating residents to the official TRCs or leaving them to fend for themselves. However, within a few days, the migrants would return to occupy these locations once more.

Between May and July 2021, local authorities and the municipality of Bihać carried out a comprehensive operation to dismantle both the Krajina Metal and Dom Penzionera (Figure 6.3) informal camps, transferring their residents to Lipa (BVMN, 2021b; Klix, 2021). An employee of a UN agency operating in Una-Sana Canton (interviewed in Bihać, 2023), noted that the local community exerted considerable pressure on local authorities. In response, these authorities pressured IOM to open a new camp at Lipa. The decision to evict people-on-the-move from Krajina Metal and Dom Penzionera, and subsequently other informal camps, was driven by similar pressure from segments of the Bihać local community, aimed at relocating all migrants away from the city centre.

In autumn 2021, ‘the Helicopter’ in Velika Kladuša, which hosted at any given time between 50 and 250 individuals, was also subjected to multiple forced evictions by the authorities. It was definitively closed down on 24 November (BVMN, 2021b: 6). Residents were forced to come out of their tents, pack what they could, and board buses, not knowing where they would be taken.

Officially, the new Lipa camp was intended to also accommodate families and minors. Consequently, on 1 July 2021, the TRC Sedra was also closed, displacing families and minors who were residing there (IOM, 2021b). However, this decision did not adequately consider the unsuitability of Lipa as a site



Source: Photo by R. Gentili, May 2021.

Figure 6.3 The closure of Dom Penzionera, Bihać

for hosting families and unaccompanied minors. Some families were therefore transported to the TRC Borići, which had remained open during all these developments, while others set up improvised camps or sought refuge in abandoned buildings (Zocchi, 2022). Some chose to live in abandoned houses in villages in the Una Valley that had been partially deserted after the conflicts of the 1990s, particularly in Šturlić and Bosanska Bojna, which are near the Croatian border and relatively distant from the larger urban centres (Associated Press, 2021; BVMN, 2021a).

CONCLUSION

The archipelago of formal, semi-formal, and informal camps in Una-Sana Canton has been almost completely transformed since 2018. Initially, when large numbers of refugees and migrants began to arrive in the canton, they struggled to successfully cross the border with Croatia. This generated what has been described as a 'bottleneck', with more and more people arriving

but fewer able to pass through (Šantić et al., 2022; Umek & Minca, 2020; Zocchi, 2023). At that time, there were no formal camps, and makeshift settlements quickly emerged in Bihać, as well as in villages and areas closer to the border. However, by early 2019, four formal reception centres had opened (namely TRCs Sedra, Miral, Bira, and Borići). As discussed in this chapter, three of these original ‘formal’ camps have since closed, along with nearly all the makeshift encampments that sprang up over the years. Additionally, other formal and semi-formal camps have been opened, closed, and even re-opened. While the ‘bottleneck’ has lessened over time – due to changes in the policing of the Croatian border and fluctuations in the number of people arriving in the canton – camps have remained the primary accommodation for irregularized migrants in Una-Sana.

The camps in the canton have varied greatly (and individual camps continue to vary over time) in terms of the basic conditions they offer and the basic needs they meet (or do not meet). What they all have in common is that every camp – from the most makeshift to the most formal – has served as a crucial node in the reproduction of this branch of the Balkan Route. As a lowest common denominator, all these camps have been places for people to stay while preparing to attempt or re-attempt crossing the border with Croatia, or while resting and recovering after experiencing pushbacks. In this sense, camps are not only a response to but also essential components of the ongoing ‘Game’. The establishment of encampments by both people-on-the-move and institutions has both responded to and sought to shape this evolving branch of the Route, which has continued to remain active in this canton at the time of writing. On the one hand, this chapter has illustrated how the continuous closures and evictions have primarily been executed by state and institutional actors, who have shaped the Route within the canton via a distinct camp politics and set of spatial strategies. On the other hand, however, the evolution of Una-Sana Canton’s camp archipelago has also been shaped by a variety of other actors over time, including the people-on-the-move themselves, local and international volunteers and activists who supported them, and local protestors and activists who opposed the presence of irregularized migrants. A further influence on the changing face of the camp archipelago may be attributed to the interplay between the provision and withdrawal of support by national and international institutions; European and international organizations; and municipal, cantonal, and state authorities.

In this chapter, we have aimed to demonstrate the clear relationship between the opening and closing of formal migrant camps and the emergence and later dissolution of the archipelago of makeshift camps throughout the Una-Sana Canton. This relationship has played out in several ways. First, the hesitancy to open formal centres, coupled with their inadequacy as the bottleneck in the canton increased, led to a proliferation of makeshift camps – as was initially

the case in 2018, and on several more occasions over the following years. At times, this inadequacy became highly visible, particularly at the entrances of formal camps. For example, in 2019, the TRC Bira faced the arrival of a number of migrants that exceeded its capacity. Furthermore, the opening of formal camps has frequently coincided with the eviction of informal encampments, such as the removal of hundreds of migrants and refugees residing in informal accommodations in Bihać to the semi-formal Vučjak site. However, this has not been a one-time, one-directional process; the closure of formal (and semi-formal) camps has at times, unsurprisingly, led to an increase in informal encampments. A notable example is the infamous fire at Lipa in December 2020, which, combined with the lack of suitable alternative sites, forced many people to sleep rough at the burned site for an extended period. Similarly, the closure of TRC Sedra in 2021 pushed many families to live in abandoned buildings in the border region or in improvised camps.

Ultimately, however, the gradual opening of new formal camps over the years has facilitated the progressive erasure of the archipelago of makeshift camps across the region, thereby formalizing and securitizing the reception of migrants in the canton. In addition, the eviction, over the years, of the informal encampments has considerably reduced, though never entirely erased, the presence of people-on-the-move in city and town centres, particularly in Bihać and Velika Kladuša. While some of the initial formal camps were opened in urban areas (such as the TRCs Bira and Miral), security concerns raised by both protesting residents and the authorities led to their closure and the deliberate distancing of migrant and refugee accommodation from both urban areas and borders. The opening of Lipa as an emergency camp during the Covid-19 period facilitated the closure of TRC Miral in urban Velika Kladuša and TRC Bira in urban Bihać. Later, the eviction of the Krajina Metal and Dom Penzionera squats in Bihać in 2021 was also facilitated by the (re)opening of Lipa as a temporary reception centre.

TRC Borići remains today an exception to this strategic 'distancing' policy and appears to meet greater tolerance due to its role hosting families, women, and minors.³ Nevertheless, rumours of plans to close it persist as we write, particularly during periods when the number of people-on-the-move in the canton is relatively low. The formalization of accommodation has also been accompanied by increased securitization, evident in the construction of fences and surveillance systems around camps. Exceptional levels of securitization were observed during the Covid-19 emergency, when stringent mobility restrictions were placed on camp residents that did not entirely apply to other residents of the canton; this was only made possible by the migrants' containment in the

³ This was true at the time of writing, however Borići has now closed.

camps. In conclusion, this chapter underscores the importance of critically examining the underlying political strategies that have informed the creation, maintenance, and closure of camps, as well as their profound impact on the mobility, visibility, and rights of migrants in this specific region. This analysis is relevant within the Una-Santa Canton itself, but also in the context of broader changes to the extended camp archipelago along the entire Balkan Route (on this, see also Chapter 2, this volume).

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7. ‘Trieste is beautiful at night’

Claudio Minca and Dragan Umek

At that moment, from the mountain, I could see the lights of the city on the water. Seeing them was a great moment of happiness in my life. On the border at night, from the mountain, Trieste is very beautiful.
(Refugee interviewed in the documentary *Trieste è bella di notte*)

Trieste è bella di notte (literally, ‘Trieste is beautiful at night’¹) is the title of a powerful 2023 documentary by Matteo Calore, Stefano Collizzolli, and Andrea Segre that focuses on key moments during undocumented migrants’ traversal of the Balkan Route. The 75-minute film highlights at least two aspects of migrants’ experiences during this dangerous journey that speak to the theme of this chapter: first, several scenes were shot in some of the make-shift camps that punctuate the corridor, where migrants live for short periods while waiting to attempt their next informal border crossing; second, the documentary scrutinizes events surrounding the pushback operations implemented by the Italian authorities on the border with Slovenia in 2020, which were the subject of much controversy and, above all, were ultimately found to have been ‘illegal’ per a court ruling issued in Rome the following year.² The documentary dwells extensively on the testimonies of the migrants themselves, especially some of those who had managed to reach Trieste, Italy, viewed by many as the ‘end’ of the Balkan Route, or at least as the end of one of its main branches – namely, the segment that runs from Bosnia and Herzegovina to the Adriatic city of Trieste via Croatia and Slovenia (see Minca & Collins, 2021; Minca & Umek, 2020).

The title of the documentary, which has been screened throughout Italy, attracting considerable interest, is inspired by one of its final scenes, in which a migrant interviewed at a Trieste reception centre, in the moving words quoted above, describes his joy at seeing the lights of Trieste from on high for the first

¹ The title of the documentary was officially translated into English as ‘*Trieste Shines at Night*’ (Calore et al., 2023).

² ‘Ordinanza’ n. R.G. 56420/2020 of 28/01/2021.

time, a joy that was bound up with the feeling of having ‘made it’, of having completed his perilous journey towards Western Europe and across the many hostile borders that are part of this informal corridor through the Balkans. Although there is no consensus in the relevant ‘grey’ literature that Trieste is the final point of arrival for most migrants coming from the Balkan Route – indeed, it appears that depending on the period only between 15 and 25% of arrivals actually stop and ask for asylum there – in opening this chapter, we attribute crucial importance to the sentiment expressed by the migrant in the documentary – and by many others we have interviewed in recent months – of having reached the end of the ‘Game’, of having arrived somewhere in Western Europe, and of finally at least being safe (for a detailed description of the ‘Game’, see Chapter 1 in this volume; also Minca & Collins, 2021).

Hence, in this chapter, we set out to ‘think like the Balkan Route’ from one of its arrival points: the Adriatic city of Trieste, located only a few kilometres from the border with Slovenia. Partly in response to the relative dearth of academic literature on Trieste’s role in this informal corridor – a role that has nevertheless received much scrutiny in the Italian media and in reports by local organizations supporting migrants – we begin our analysis with the ‘bird’s-eye’ view of the city evoked in the epigraph. This perspective represents the moment when most migrants, having made their way to the Italian border on foot through the forest, catch their first glimpse of Trieste as they emerge from the woods that have sheltered them right up to the edge of the karst ridge overlooking the city they are about to enter.

In previous work, we have discussed how the migrants’ – finally ‘free’ – pathway into the city (and Italy) almost always leads to what we have defined as the core ‘refugee hub’ in Trieste: Piazza della Libertà, a garden square in front of the train station (Umek & Minca, 2024b). As we discovered in the course of multiple interviews, the majority of migrants who reached Trieste were already aware of this place before their arrival. They identified it as a key location where they can become fully visible, receive humanitarian assistance, and begin the process of obtaining recognition for their protection status. As documented in the next sections, the reception system and the experience of ‘having arrived’ do not always match their expectations. Many migrants, although ‘registered’ and therefore legally present in the country, have been de facto ‘abandoned’ by the institutions in the ill-concealed hope that they will leave and ultimately become the ‘problem’ of other cities in Italy or even other countries in Europe (see International Rescue Committee [IRC] et al., 2024: 10–12).

All this has generated, and continues to generate as we write, what we might describe as a consolidated informal refugee³ geography in certain key areas of the city. This geography is connected in a complex and somewhat ambivalent manner to the presence of two official reception centres, the provision of formal assistance by the national authorities, the policy of 'implicit abandonment' implemented to some degree by the municipal authorities, and the crucial support activities carried out by volunteers and humanitarian organizations in Piazza della Libertà and across the city (IRC Italy, 2024a). In this chapter, therefore, we reflect on the tension between the perspective of hope that Trieste offers to refugees who have successfully completed the Balkan Route and finally arrived in this Adriatic city, which is in any case one of the leading gateways to Western Europe, and the forms of 'spatial harassment' enacted against them by the local authorities. In parallel, we also explore how the refugees themselves 'see the Route from Trieste' – or 'see Trieste as part of the Route' – and how support and solidarity networks have elected Trieste to play the key symbolic role that, until recently, was largely assigned to other 'refugee hubs' along this informal migration corridor, such as Bihać in Bosnia and Herzegovina (see Chapter 6, this volume).

THRESHOLDS

At one point, *Trieste è bella di notte* shows a striking image of Trieste and its gulf from above. The vantage point is inside Slovenia, just a few kilometres over the border. From this spot, migrants arriving from the Route descend, not without risk to their bodily safety, a steep path down a karst slope. After several hours of walking, sometimes even after spending another night in the 'jungle' in a makeshift camp that has hosted people-on-the-move for years, they cross the border and prepare to enter the city. The view is not only highly evocative, but in the imagination of the migrants we interviewed – many of whom had entered Italy via this path – it represents the last stage in their journey across the Balkans, the final push before making themselves visible again and, in many cases, before asking for protection without fear of being rejected or, even worse, physically attacked and pushed back (see Figure 7.1).

It is worth dwelling for a moment or two on this threshold between the 'city' and the 'forest', which is also a threshold between visibility and invisibility for many of the undocumented migrants who travel along sections of this onerous route. Indeed, the interplay between visibility and invisibility is key to

³ In the Introduction, we note that different chapters use different terminology. Since most migrants register as 'asylum seekers' in Trieste, we prefer to use the term refugee when we quote them.



Source: Photo by the authors, December 2024.

Figure 7.1 View of Trieste from the Karst Plateau

understanding the geography of this informal migration corridor as a whole. To explore this interplay ‘from Trieste’ – which often reflects the broader interplay between formal and informal refugee spatialities along the entire Balkan Route – we conducted, in 2023 and 2024, fifty-two semi-structured and four walk-along interviews with migrants who had arrived in Trieste. We were fortunate to be assisted in this research by Shahid Aziz, the cultural mediator for the European Research Council (ERC) project TheGAME. Most of the interviewees were awaiting a decision on their asylum applications and had not been allocated a place at a reception centre, leaving them to fend for themselves and forcing them to sleep rough in the city for months on end. These interviews were complemented by a detailed and continuous analysis of news coverage on the presence of migrants in Trieste, as well as numerous reports published by various non-governmental organizations (NGOs), particularly Consorzio Italiano di Solidarietà (ICS), International Rescue Committee Italia (IRC Italy), Diaconia Valdese, and other humanitarian organizations (IRC et al., 2024).

During these anonymous interviews we focused extensively on the issue of strategic (or tactical) (in)visibility and the associated risks for groups and individuals. We relatedly sought to understand how the interviewees had experienced arriving in Trieste after such a long journey. While avoiding the specifics of individual border crossings, we explored the connections between the border violence perpetrated by the authorities in some Balkan countries, together with the risks and anxieties of walking through forests, mountains, or open fields and along railway tracks, and the migrants' perceptions of Trieste as an actual or potential end point of 'the Game'. Nearly all the migrants interviewed had travelled to the city via Bosnia and Herzegovina, although not all who enter Croatia from that border necessarily end up in Trieste, which has become a reference point for Afghans, Pakistanis, and Bengalis in particular. While we describe here the routes taken, let us be clear about one thing: this is not sensitive information, because everyone in Trieste involved in the 'management' and support of migrants knows about these routes.

Trieste featured in the retrospective accounts of the migrants who took part in our research as a sort of mythical space within the collective imaginary surrounding the Route. It is frequently identified as such within the extensive web of messaging and contacts that people-on-the-move share with their peers via mobile phone and social media in the course of their migratory journey. When not acquired via the 'migrant grapevine', this information is routinely provided by smugglers, who sometimes accompany the migrants all the way into the city, while at other times briefing them before dropping them off near the border. Indeed, most of the interviewees knew before they arrived there that Trieste was a safe place to stop. Even if they were apprehended by the authorities after entering Italian territory – they claimed – this would not imply any risk of being pushed back, but simply of being taken to a centre for identification. They were aware that from Trieste they could travel with relative freedom to other Italian and European destinations. Finally, they confirmed that there were various access points to the city through the forest and that these access points were not usually patrolled; they also knew in advance that once they arrived, they would be largely free to leave the forest, go to the nearest village, and take a bus to the city centre.

I didn't know it before [the city], but when I saw it from the mountain it seemed very beautiful. I understood the next day that I was finally in Trieste [...] (Refugee from Pakistan, 28, interviewed in Pashtu, Trieste, August 2023)

[...] what I had heard about Trieste made me happy thinking about the fact that we would be far from the difficulties and that we would be able to apply for asylum. (Refugee from Pakistan, 21, interviewed in Urdu, Trieste, July 2023)

For some time, one of the main points of access to Trieste has been the Val Rosandra (the Rosandra Valley) and the village of Bagnoli located at a key exit point of the same valley. More recently, the woods around the official Ferneti border crossing have become a further point of entry. In the latter case, many interviewed migrants have taken the train to Sežana in Slovenia and then walked along a trail normally used by hikers and cyclists to the village of Orlek and from there to the village of Trebiciano, which is already in Italy. Here, they boarded bus number 51 and entered the city relatively unnoticed. Some, in order to avoid being intercepted by the Slovenian authorities, got off the train earlier and walked through the forest. Once again, the forest protected them from the eyes of the authorities until, once in Italy, they could 'reveal themselves' and even use public transport:

Two of my companions arrived [in Italy] before us and told us that we had to take bus number 51 first and then bus number 4 to go down to the city. The first thing we did was go to Piazza della Libertà. Some of the guys in our group continued their journey to Milan or other countries but I preferred to stay here in Italy, in Trieste. (Refugee from Pakistan, 28, interviewed in Pashtu, August 2023)

Perhaps this is why Trieste, seen from above and especially at night, is so beautiful in the eyes of the migrants arriving from the Balkan Route. From above, at a certain point, the city materializes, and becomes a concrete destination, whatever the viewers' final goal and destination may be. More specifically, it represents the end of the Game and, above all, of the multiple risks associated with this endeavour (see Chapter 1, this volume).

All in all, from the point of view of the authorities (despite some of the official rhetoric), these are borders that make little sense to patrol in their entirety, amongst other reasons because, as mentioned above, even when the Italian authorities intercept migrants on the road as they approach Trieste, they are still obliged to take them to the identification centre and offer them the possibility of initiating the asylum procedure. These relatively 'soft' border practices are undoubtedly linked to the currently intense (and historically important) local cross-border relations between Italy and Slovenia in this part of Europe (Battisti, 1979; Del Bianco & Gasparini, 2008: 37–42; also, Bufon & Minghi, 2020). They may, however, be influenced by recent geopolitical developments in the region. For example, Slovenia's new progressive government since 2022 has been relatively more tolerant of migrants, while the suspension of Schengen at this border by the Italian authorities since October 2023 has been justified by perceived increased security concerns linked to the new war scenarios in the Middle East (Lusa, 2024).

At the same time, the migrants' narratives allow us to reconstruct their perspective on the Balkan Route as they now perceive it from Trieste. The Route

is typically represented as a long and painful experience and an extremely dangerous journey across countries with names that are often difficult to remember and pronounce, and borders patrolled by hostile authorities and sophisticated and expensive technologies. It includes stops at official camps where the migrants managed to find refuge (whose names, however, they cannot always recall) and at others where they were forcibly detained, as well as stays in squats, safe houses, and other informal shelters. Above all, however, the Route is associated with long journeys on foot – often lasting days, if not weeks – through forests, continuing in all weather, with scant access to water and food, crossing rivers and streams, and enduring the hardship and fear of nights sleeping in the rough, hoping not to be intercepted by the police.

I almost always slept outside, I spent the nights in places where I couldn't even stretch out and so I slept sitting up. Once, while I was sleeping in the woods, I heard animal noises and that time I was really scared. Sometimes I even slept in a sleeping bag. I repeat, being in the woods was really very difficult [...] (Refugee from Afghanistan, 28, interviewed in Pashtu, March 2024)

I don't know what city we were in but we continued our journey without stopping. The journey usually took place at night after 02:00. I didn't stop. We slept in the woods, in ruins, abandoned structures and sometimes in the safe houses of the smugglers. (Refugee from Pakistan, 24, interviewed in Urdu, May 2024)

These narratives – which are shaped to some degree by the fact that all the interviewees had successfully 'made it to the end' – point to the constant interplay between the need to become invisible by blending into the forest or sheltering in abandoned buildings under harsh and precarious conditions, and the parallel need to use public transport infrastructures, such as train and bus stations or even taxi stands, to visit key locations to make contact with and meet smugglers and other migrants, or even to deliberately and strategically enter a reception centre in Bosnia and Herzegovina or Serbia in order to receive temporary assistance and support before continuing onwards along the Route.

I took the bus to go first to Belgrade, from there I took another bus to go to the border with Bosnia, I don't remember the name of the place where I arrived and there wasn't even the facilitator with us. He was waiting for us near the border, he had sent us the coordinates of the place where he was waiting for us. In fact, when we arrived at the border, he was waiting for us, he helped us cross the border with Bosnia in a rubber dinghy then we went to the camp in Sarajevo. (Refugee from Pakistan, 20, interviewed in Dari, July 2024)

In another work produced in the context of this project, the first author insisted at length on the relationship between forest and city as a useful conceptual entry point for understanding the geographies of the Balkan Route (see

Carter-White & Minca, 2025). Presenting the critical threshold between ‘the forest’ and ‘the city’ as key to understanding what Giorgio Agamben (1998) has famously termed the ‘structure of the ban’ – that is to say, the processes of exclusionary inclusion of certain groups and individuals that characterize the functioning of the modern nation-state – he emphasized the role of this threshold in determining how migrants travelling the Route are both excluded and ‘held back’ by the nation states they pass through.

These people-on-the-move need to be kept away from the city but always retain the potential to reappear there. Perhaps this is why border authorities often strip migrants apprehended in the forest of their shoes and phones, before releasing them back into the jungle wilderness in their ‘state of nature’, so to speak [...] The migrants’ ban to the forest also serves to perpetuate an image of them as a wild and unruly presence from which (European) society must be immunized. (Carter-White & Minca, 2025: 182, 181)

We also suggested, in line with our earlier work on Agamben’s theory of the sovereign exception (Minca, 2007), that the city metaphorically represents the *civitas* – to again borrow from the terminology of the Italian political philosopher (Agamben, 1998) – while the forest represents the *selva*, or all-that-is-not-*civitas*. The *selva* is the space where those who do not have the right to a place make themselves invisible. They engage in dehumanizing forms of ‘returning to nature’ – indeed, in the case of people-on-the-move along the Balkan Route, they are forced to do so by the border regimes in force in the territories they cross to reach their desired destination.

Both of these spatial concepts include literal and metaphorical dimensions: *civitas* refers to ‘the city’ as an actual place, but also as a principle of civilization (Giaccaria & Minca, 2011: 68–69), meaning that even the development of rural landscapes and regions could be considered part of the spatial production of the *civitas* [...]. *Selva*, in turn, refers not only to actual forests, but also denotes a principle of untamed and brutal nature. These can be considered spatial counterparts of the anthropophorous human-animal relation since, analogous to the latter, *civitas* is fundamentally produced through the separation and exclusion of all those spaces associated with the *selva*. (Carter-White & Minca, 2025: 145)

We lack the space here to elaborate on the structure of this ‘refugee ban’ across the Route as a whole, but instead refer readers to our previous extensive analysis of the troubled geographies of this migratory corridor (Ibid.). Suffice it to remark that the Balkan Route is both constituted and experienced by migrants as an endless and complex geographical interplay between the city/*civitas* – in the squares that are key for them (Afghan Park in Belgrade, Victoria Square in Athens, Piazza della Libertà in Trieste, etc.), in the stations and on the trains and buses, etc. – and the forest/*selva* as a space where migrants are not only

hidden in order to conceal them from the eyes of the authorities and local communities but also dehumanized and exposed to the intemperance of nature (see, again, Minca, 2023; Vaughan-Williams, 2015, 2017). So how may we read Trieste and the Route in the light of these brief considerations? How may we go deeper into the question of whether Trieste is truly 'beautiful at night'?

First, as mentioned earlier, the migrants we interviewed confirmed that once in Trieste, they felt free from the violence they had often experienced during their journey across the Balkans. But perhaps more importantly, they stated that once in Trieste, they could consciously become visible again, revealing their refugee status and entering the city as subjects on-the-move, entitled to be welcomed and considered for protection. This transition from *selva* to *civitas*, this threshold, which is a crucial part of the Trieste borderscape, features in their accounts as the very end of the Balkan Route, as the gateway to 'Europe' and, consequently, as their entrance into a new political geography.

[...] my goal was to get here to Italy and so for me everything ended here. For me the end of the Game is here in Trieste. Instead, other friends of mine who came with me continued their journey to other European countries [...] The difficulties end here. Some continue to other countries, but they have no difficulties and they are not afraid of the police. Their lives are not in danger, they are not afraid of being readmitted to previous countries and they do not encounter other problems along their journey. (Refugee from Pakistan, 33, interviewed in Pashtu, June 2023)

This perception likely underpins many of the details that, in their description of this 'passage', mark the migrants' preparations for 'arrival'. These usually commence on the last night, often spent in the woods around Bagnoli, in the nearby municipality of San Dorligo della Valle. Here, after changing into clean clothes, they abandon their rucksacks, sleeping bags, and other equipment needed to survive in the woods, and walk to the first inhabited areas, where they look for a bus stop or continue on foot towards the city/*civitas* (see Figure 7.2). At this point, they have almost regained their right to become visible once and for all.

Near the border with Italy, the facilitator told us that the track we were walking on led inside the Italian territory and if something happened, we would have to continue walking on the track to enter Italy. In short, we walked from Bosnia to Trieste. It took us about 16 days to get to Trieste. [...] When I came down from the mountain of Trieste I was walking and I was stopped by the police. He took me to the tent where after having photographed me they sent me to a camp because the Corona virus was still. (Refugee from Afghanistan, 34, interviewed in Pashtu, July 2024)

When I arrived, I was very tired, I rested for a while on the mountain then I went down to the city. Here the police took me and took me to the camp. From there I went independently to Gorizia. (Refugee from Afghanistan, 18, interviewed in Pashtu, March 2024)



Source: Photo by the authors, November 2022.

Figure 7.2 *Abandoned clothes in the woods near the village of Bagnoli della Rosandra (Trieste)*

Other migrants enter via Sežana, arriving by train but still bearing the traces of their perilous journey through forests on their skin. Trieste-as-*civitas* awaits them. With all its disappointments and complications, it nevertheless represents the end of the *selva*. But does it really? Is Trieste also beautiful in full daylight?

IS TRIESTE THE NEW BIHAĆ?

In 2023, over 16,000 migrants arrived in Trieste from the Balkan Route and were largely registered in the Italian reception system. However, many others passed through the city without stopping, a contingent for which nobody has an accurate count (IRC Italy, 2024a: 1–5). In early 2024, these numbers somewhat decreased, partly due to a tightening of control measures on the Croatian border with Bosnia and Herzegovina. Nevertheless, Trieste continues to see a regular stream of arrivals. As we write, anything between 30 and 60 people arrive in Piazza della Libertà each day (IRC Italy, 2024b). When they enter the square – sometimes accompanied by facilitators, but mostly on their own in small groups – they are usually greeted by other migrants, volunteers,

or the humanitarian organizations that are a daily presence at this site and who advise them to register as soon as possible to access formal assistance and support. Elsewhere, we have described in detail the formal and informal geographies of Trieste's putative 'refugee hub', which is concentrated around the train and bus stations (Umek & Minca, 2024a). In that intervention, we emphasized that Piazza della Libertà, in particular, has long served as a primary location for providing direct humanitarian assistance to migrants arriving from the Balkan Route; it has also acted as a key meeting point for connecting with other migrants already in the city and with smugglers for those looking to continue their journey.

There are two official refugee camps in the Trieste area, both located outside the city: a former scout camp, now commonly referred to by migrants as 'Campo Sacro', which is situated near the village of Prosecco on the Trieste Karst; and Casa Malala, a reception centre near the Ferneti border crossing, also on the Karst Plateau. Together, the two camps house around 200 people. During our visits there, the residents appeared to be living in relatively difficult conditions given that both facilities are quite run down. In addition to these two centres, both run by Caritas, around 1,000 migrants awaiting asylum are accommodated in what is recognized nationally as an experimental form of 'diffused hospitality'. This 'diffused' hospitality system utilizes apartments in various parts of the city to avoid housing asylum seekers in camps, with a view to making their presence more 'organic' to urban daily life. Other key sites where assistance is provided to migrants in need include: the Centro Diurno (Day Centre) in Via Udine, which is also close to the railway station and Piazza della Libertà, is run by the Comunità di San Martino al Campo, and offers vital support to those sleeping rough in the city; the Caritas canteen in Via dell'Istria; and other smaller sleeping facilities that are mainly used at peak times (Umek & Minca, 2024a: 51–56).

In addition to formal accommodation are what we term as the informal refugee geographies of the city, which are often associated with people-on-the-move spending the night in or around Piazza della Libertà or near the railway station. Some migrants only stay in Trieste for a few hours before catching the first available train to Milan. However, others end up in informal accommodation for much longer periods. The most important informal site was the 'Silos', a huge, abandoned building next to the train and bus station, which was used for years as a squat by migrants arriving from the Route (Altin, 2020; see also Carter-White & Minca, 2025); here suffice it to recall that for a long time, and especially over the last two years, the Silos was home to hundreds of 'registered' migrants who were abandoned by the authorities. At the same time, it also hosted the emergence of various forms of everyday informal sociality among migrants (Carter-White & Minca, 2025). The Silos sometimes housed up to 500 people, the majority of whom had previously initiated the process of

establishing their right to asylum. The authorities had simply instructed them to wait to be called back for an interview. If their interview had already taken place, they were told to await the final decision. In theory, these individuals were entitled to a place in a reception centre. But when the camps were full, there was literally nowhere for them to go, and so most of them ended up sleeping in the Silos – which truly became an informal refugee camp – or in other squats around the station (Pretto 2023; TriestePrima 2023).

Over time, the Silos has taken on the status of an unruly, almost mythical place – borne out by the accounts of many migrants and the volunteers who assist them. In many ways, this place resembles other informal ‘residential’ refugee camps that have sprung up at different times and under different circumstances along the Balkan Route: these camps too have become almost monumental sites, if only in the memory and imagination of migrants and their solidarity networks (Jordan & Minca, 2023a, 2023b). Given the precarious living conditions of hundreds of people forced to reside in this large makeshift camp, the Silos became the subject of national headlines, which have long denounced the scandal of this ‘provoked’ humanitarian emergency (ANSA, 2024; Candito, 2024; Schiavone, 2024). However, for some of the migrants we interviewed, the Silos also represented an important space of freedom and self-organization, where they experienced not only discomfort and unhealthy living conditions, but also a great deal of solidarity and meaningful forms of social life, often organized around ‘clusters’ of tents, and sometimes along ethnic lines (see Figure 7.3).

To eat I sometimes go to the Caritas canteen⁴ and sometimes I don’t go there at all because it’s about a 40-minute walk away and you can’t take the bus because you get fined by the ticket inspector! For this reason, we often cook with friends in Silos. (Refugee from Afghanistan, 26, interviewed in Pashtu, Trieste, February 2024)

When the Silos was finally evacuated in June 2024 (Baraggino & Tieri, 2024; De Filippo, 2024; Il Post, 2024), partly in response to an endless string of complaints and petitions from local organizations and civil society at large calling for more decent accommodation for all migrants (TriestePrima, 2024), other squats immediately sprang up in the Porto Vecchio area, just behind the station. These are mostly run by smugglers and migrants who had previously congregated around the Silos (Sarti, 2024; Fieldnotes, October 2024).

In light of these brief reflections on the refugee geographies in Trieste, we will spend the remainder of this chapter exploring two aspects of the city’s role

⁴ The Caritas canteen is where refugees and asylum seekers are offered free meals on a daily basis.



Source: Photo by the authors, 20 June 2024.

Figure 7.3 Inside the Silos the day before the eviction

vis-à-vis the Balkan Route, before finally formulating some conclusions. The first aspect of note concerns the considerable interest that Trieste has recently attracted among activists, journalists, and researchers; the second has to do with the ambiguous position of the authorities regarding the continued presence of migrants from the Route in the city.

As previously noted, narratives of the Balkan Route since 2015 have emphasized the importance of a series of locations that, for various reasons, have become highly symbolic of the 'choking' strategies (Tazzioli, 2020) imposed on migrant mobility by the border policies of the various countries involved. However, these places also symbolize the related forms of resistance enacted by volunteers and by the migrants themselves. Examples include the notorious Moria camp in Lesbos during the first phase of the humanitarian crisis in 2015 and 2016 (but also in later periods until its closure in 2020 after the outbreak of a large fire), or the huge makeshift camp that emerged in Idomeni on the border between Greece and North Macedonia in spring 2016. Other key sites are the self-managed space at the Plaza Hotel in Athens (Raimondi, 2019), the

square in the heart of Belgrade that came to be dubbed ‘Afghan Park’ when it was populated by migrants and smugglers between 2015 and 2022 (Umek & Minca, 2024a: 61–66), and the well-known makeshift camp called ‘The Barracks’ that sprang up in abandoned buildings at Belgrade’s former railway station and was occupied by up to 2,000 people in the winter of 2016–2017 before being demolished and replaced by an internationally renowned waterfront (Wright, 2015; see, also, Chapter 5, this volume). However, we might also mention the town of Bihać and, more generally, the canton of Una-Sana in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which, according to Jordan (2024), has – since 2018 – represented a leading ‘transit hub’ for migrants on the Balkan Route. As such, this city has long attracted both international media interest and a large number of volunteers and international humanitarian organizations. Not surprisingly therefore, the situation of migrants in Bihać has been the focus of much of the recent academic literature on the Balkan Route, as reviewed in Chapter 6 of this volume.

In recent years, and especially from 2022 onwards, Trieste has received similar attention due to the significant increase in arrivals from the Balkan Route and the growing proportions of the migrant population forced to live between the Silos, Piazza della Libertà, and the official camps. The tendency of researchers to mainly track ‘crisis’ situations, especially when they are widely covered by the international media, has not yet been sufficiently scrutinized in relation to the Balkan Route, although the ‘over-researching’ of certain themes or areas related to migration has been extensively examined in the literature in relation to other migratory phenomena around the world (see, among others, Pascucci, 2017; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2012). Be that as it may, during our extensive fieldwork in Trieste and our participant observation of Piazza della Libertà, the Silos, and other key sites for the city’s ‘refugee hub’, we have recently noticed a growing number of individuals and groups who have come to Trieste to study the situation there and, at the same time, to assist the migrants (see, for instance, OBC, 2024).

Interestingly, some of these parties had already been to Bihać or other ‘hot’ points along the Route; still others went to Bihać after visiting Trieste, as though to confirm the link between the two cities, which appear to be naturally viewed as belonging to the same informal migration corridor. Indeed, according to our extensive participant observation and the many informal conversations we have had in recent months, not a week goes by without a new group of activists or representatives of humanitarian organizations, who are mostly but not exclusively Italian, as well as journalists and researchers from various countries, displaying interest in the migrant situation in Trieste and particularly in Piazza della Libertà and the Silos. We were informally told that among the migrants, it is joked that in Piazza della Libertà there can sometimes be more volunteers and researchers than migrants! While, as noted at

the outset, there is currently a lack of substantial academic publications on the situation in Trieste, we expect this to change dramatically over the coming months, in line with what has happened in recent years in the case of Bihać, which is arguably one of the most researched sites along the Balkan Route (Minca & Umek, 2020; Zocchi, 2023, 2024; for a more comprehensive review, see Chapter 6, this volume). This is especially likely given that much of the previous academic literature on the Balkan Route has concentrated on the sites that received intense international media coverage and were characterized by dramatic events, a strong presence of volunteers and international organizations and, above all, the visibility of migrants in public spaces – an issue that we shall revisit in the conclusions.

This brings us to the second aspect we set out to analyse in this final section, namely the way in which the authorities have managed (or neglected to manage) the significant ongoing presence of migrants in Trieste in recent years. It should be pointed out here that this strong presence of migrants in Trieste's public spaces is mainly due to the fact that in Italy the right to asylum is a genuine reality: once migrants have entered Italian territory, as mentioned above, they can safely make themselves visible, coming out of the *selva* and publicly claiming their right to protection. With the increasing securitization of migrant mobility and border management in most of the countries along the Route, the presence of migrants in the public spaces of cities, which was quite common in the summer of 2015 and the years immediately afterwards, has essentially become a thing of the past. In other words, apart from a few places in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Trieste, migrants along the Route have become invisible, with the exception of those living in official camps (KlikAktiv, 2024a: 27, 2024b: 15–21).

To return to the situation in Trieste, although the city has a well-established reception system that can accommodate over 1,000 asylum seekers at any one time, and a longstanding and effective solidarity network that has been welcoming arriving migrants for years and assisting them to enter the reception system, the capacity of the two official camps has long been entirely inadequate vis-à-vis the number of people awaiting a decision on their asylum applications. Despite repeated protests by humanitarian organizations and, more generally, from sectors of the press and of civil society, the authorities have long refused to consider opening a new camp in Trieste to accommodate all those entitled to hospitality (TriestePrima, 2024). Moreover, the transfer of some of these asylum seekers to other reception centres on Italian territory has generally been delayed, partial, and wholly unpredictable, while, according to our interviewees, the attempts of many newly arrived immigrants to register at the *Questura* (the police headquarters) have often encountered bureaucratic impediments such as overcrowded offices, inadequate opening hours, and repeated invitations to come back another day.

When I went there [to the police station] they didn't even accept my application because there were so many people who wanted to do it. Every day they called 3 or 4 Afghans, 3 or 4 Pakistanis, 3 or 4 Bengalis and 3 or 4 Indians; the rest of the group they sent back. (Refugee from Pakistan, 22, interviewed in Urdu, Trieste, July 2023)

I went to the police station every day but they didn't take my asylum request, yesterday they took me from the Silos during the police raid and they took me to the police station to make the asylum request. Lots of people go there and they only take 8 people a day and the others have to go back another day. (Refugee from Pakistan, 21, interviewed in Urdu, March 2024)

The upshot of this policy, which Sanyal (2017) and others have described as a 'no camp policy', has been to leave hundreds of registered asylum seekers with no alternative but to sleep on the streets, whether in makeshift accommodation such as the Silos, or without any accommodation at all. Elsewhere (Carter-White & Minca, 2025), we have argued that this policy of non-intervention is associated with the progressive debilitation of the migrants (see Puar, 2017; also Davies et al., 2024), who are reduced to living in the precarious conditions of what amounts to an urban *selva* characterized by rats, disease, rubbish, and 'open air' toilets. Not to mention the fact that, during the winter months, these people are exposed to the elements, in particular the cold, the wind, and especially the rain, and that much of this informal space is often flooded. In addition, the Silos and the area around Piazza della Libertà, besides being places of encounter, support, and refuge, have also been the scene of many episodes of violence among migrants, in particular numerous stabbings by individuals or groups who have taken advantage of the informal, unruly spaces generated around the Trieste refugee hub to blackmail or rob their fellow migrants (Curzi, 2024; Il Gazzettino, 2023; Il Piccolo, 2023).

The authorities' ambivalent approach to the presence of migrants in the city has therefore consisted of providing delayed and partial support and implicitly harassing many of them by not providing accommodation for all, while at the same time keeping a relatively low profile with regard to the presence of migrants in the areas described above, and in particular in the Silos, prior to the eviction and subsequent relocation of all Silos residents in June 2024 (Pribetti, 2024). Despite the daily presence of police (or other law enforcement) patrols in the square, especially after some of the violent incidents mentioned above, the authorities have maintained a mostly discreet presence over time, and there have been no reports of violent clashes with law enforcement since 2020 when the last notorious pushback operations took place. The police tend to stay on the fringes of the square, although they will sometimes walk around the square, usually when they are looking for someone. There were also numerous 'political raids' on the Silos in the months leading up to its closure,

but in most cases, these involved checking the residents' documents and taking the undocumented to register and identify them (Trieste Cafè, 2023).

While local activists might see the presence of law enforcement as an indirect form of repression (Fieldnotes, June 2024), their work in the square to support migrants has not been significantly affected by it, with the exception of the placing of fencing around the statue of the Empress Sissi, which has been read as a form of 'spatial harassment'. At the same time, some of the migrants we interviewed stated that they felt safer with a police presence, as this acted to deter violence by gangs who blackmail more vulnerable migrants or even put pressure on some of the organizations working in the square. This seems to be a paradoxical effect (or perhaps a deliberate one) of the 'no camp' policy implemented in recent years, particularly by the local authorities: even the presence of the police and the possibility of one day being transferred to a camp was described by our interviewees as a highly desirable perspective. Is then Trieste really so beautiful in full daylight?

IS TRIESTE BEAUTIFUL IN FULL DAYLIGHT?

As we complete this chapter, arrivals from Bosnia and Herzegovina are increasing once again. However, as previously noted, while 'Arab' migrants (so described by their peers from other countries) are present in Bosnia and Herzegovina and also cross from there into Croatia, they generally do not come to Trieste, with few exceptions. Those who arrive in Trieste are mainly Afghans, Pakistanis, Bengalis, and, more recently, also Nepalese. At night-time, Syrian and Kurdish families may pass through the city for a few hours, usually waiting for someone to help them on their way. Trieste, with all its contradictions and forms of implicit abandonment by the authorities, remains in all respects a safe place (especially in comparison with other situations experienced along the Route) and above all a point of arrival after clandestine journeys through forests, mountains, and rivers, but also over walls and dangerous borders often with direct or indirect violence on the part of the border authorities.

The city of Trieste is very beautiful, and I like it a lot. Also, here there is peace and quiet. No one argues with you [...]. Along the Route people are killed and since I've been here, I've never heard of anyone being killed by another. In fact, I would like to stay here because I would have found a job opportunity. (Refugee from Pakistan, 22, interviewed in Urdu, Trieste, July 2023)

According to our interviewees, the main places of interest for migrants in Trieste, especially Piazza della Libertà, are known to many before they reach the city, or at least to those who advise them to go there once they arrive. In

this sense, Trieste remains potentially ‘beautiful by night’ for most of them, despite the inadequacy of the reception facilities provided by the authorities and the lengthy and uncertain procedures for recognizing their humanitarian status. In Trieste, they find volunteers and local organizations ready to help them on arrival and, if necessary, to treat their wounds and provide medical care for illnesses acquired during their harsh journey and time spent in the forest. They also find a relatively safe environment and a selection of places where they can become visible again, socialize, and finally think about their next steps.

The day after my arrival in the square [Piazza della Libertà] I received a tent and same blankets from the volunteers and a boy in the square told me that I could sleep in Silos. (Refugee from Pakistan, 39, interviewed in Pashtu, Trieste, August 2023)

I go there [in the square] and I also turn to volunteer organizations when I need something, especially for medical assistance. (Refugee from India, 34, interviewed in Hindi, Trieste, September 2023)

Hence, some of our interviewees reported that the feeling of having finally arrived somewhere – and the associated subsiding of the adrenaline rush experienced while en route – caused them to become depressed. This was partly due to anxiety about the bureaucratic challenges ahead and to the realization that they were far from home with an uncertain future. In addition, many of the interviews, especially those conducted in the Silos in the days leading up to the evictions, revealed that these migrants had never expected to live for months in such conditions, nor to be forced, at least in part, to return to ‘nature’, to a sort of urban *selva*, where they had slept in tents or on makeshift beds in a building infested with aggressive rats, without water or any other utilities. Not surprisingly, many of those forced to live in the Silos fell ill there because of the living conditions, especially the cold, the rats, and the lack of running water.

I want to add one thing; people come here with a lot of hopes and expectations by going severe threats and harsh conditions but when they arrive here and find such a situation, they lose their hopes and get damaged internally. Here the difficulties are too much. The pots are infected and a lot of rats are going up and down here. I don’t know which organization can help us. It is not just my opinion, all of us think like this. But fortunately, some good people also come here and help us. Let’s hope the situation gets better. We came here with a big hope of humanity. Everyone says around the world that people in Europe will treat you the same way they treat their own people. (Refugee from Pakistan, 32, interviewed in Urdu, Trieste, June 2024)

This preliminary analysis of how ‘the Route is seen from Trieste’ or ‘Trieste is seen from the Route’, which is mainly based on interviews with migrants and extensive participant observation, allows us to advance some brief final

observations. First, as repeatedly stated, Trieste was known as a final destination to the majority of our interviewees, almost all of whom arrived via Bosnia and Herzegovina, and most of whom were Afghans, Pakistanis, and Bengalis. Second, Trieste, as a crossing point and gateway to Western Europe, is used as a transit point by an increasing number of migrants, who intend to travel on to other parts of Italy or to France or England. Third, Trieste enjoys a solid reputation as a safe place among the migrants we interviewed, despite many concerns about aspects of the reception system, most notably the ambivalent attitude of the authorities, especially at the local level. Fourth, Trieste, together with Bihać and other transit points in Bosnia and Herzegovina, has recently been one of the few places along the Route where migrants remain visible outside the camps. It is therefore the only place where volunteers, activists, researchers, or journalists can go to provide help to migrants and to directly and freely involve them in their research, reporting, and political demonstrations. As we write, in all the other countries crossed by the Route, migrants are either in camps or have made themselves invisible with the assistance of increasingly powerful and sophisticated networks of smugglers.

Fifth, and perhaps most importantly, despite the authorities' relatively low-key and sometimes lenient approach to managing the presence of migrants in the city – particularly around the railway station, in Piazza della Libertà, and especially in the Silos, one of the most enduring makeshift camps along the Route – the spatial harassment and neglect experienced by hundreds of individuals who are legally present in Trieste seriously challenge the notion that the city truly offers a '*civitas*' to these people-on-the-move. Waiting times and difficult living conditions in camps are unfortunately a central aspect of the experience of most asylum seekers, as Khosravi (2010) and many others have pointed out. However, for some migrants, the experience of spending months in a rat-infested squat has made them feel, although they are now in Trieste, as though they have gone back to navigating the threshold between *civitas* and *selva*. Illegally occupying a building and living there in precarious conditions implies not only a partial return to invisibility, but also a kind of 'return to nature', something that increasingly dehumanizes and debilitates the migrants, to the point that they may now perceive a future placement in a camp as highly desirable (see Carter-White & Minca, 2025). The denial of a place in a camp, as much of our interview data suggests, implies for many the perpetuation of the conditions of the *selva* in another form, despite the assistance and freedom of movement offered by the city.

To return to the title of the documentary from which we started out, Trieste is certainly beautiful at night; it has been, and remains, a key point of arrival on the Balkan Route. For many, it also represents safety and an end to the direct border violence to which they were constantly exposed during their journey. However, only when the authorities choose to provide all of them with

the hospitality and protection they are entitled to – thereby offering them what every ‘return to the *civitas*’ should entail after their long ordeal in the ‘*sella*’ – will Trieste not only be beautiful at night, but may also become in every respect the safe haven to which many aspire during their perilous journeys. Only then will Trieste also be beautiful in full daylight, for everyone.

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