The Forging of the Balkan Route

Contextualizing the Border Regime in the EU Periphery

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In the summer of 2015, the migratory route across the Balkans »entered into the European spotlight, and indeed onto the screen of the global public« (Kasparek 2016: 2), triggering different interpretations and responses. Contrary to the widespread framing of the mass movement of people seeking refuge in Europe as ›crisis‹ and ›emergency‹ of unseen proportions, we opt for the perspective of »the long Summer of Migration« (Kasparek/Speer 2015) and an interpretation that regards it as »a historic and monumental year of migration for Europe precisely because disobedient mass mobilities have disrupted the European regime of border control« (Stierl/Heller/de Genova 2016: 23). In reaction to the disobedient mass mobilities of people, a state-tolerated and even state-organized transit of people, a »formalized corridor« (Beznec/Speer/Stojić Mitrović 2016), was gradually established. To avoid the concentration of unwanted migrants on their territory, countries along the route—sometimes in consultation with their neighboring countries and EU member states, sometimes simply by creating facts—strived to regain control over the movements by channeling and isolating them by means of the corridor (see e.g. Hameršak/Pleše 2018; Speer 2017; Tošić 2017). »Migrants didn't travel the route any more: they were hurriedly channeled along, no longer having the power to either determine their own movement or their own speed« (Kasparek 2016). The corridor, at the same time, facilitated and tamed the movement of people. In comparison to the situation in Serbia, where migrants were loosely directed to follow the path of the corridor (see e.g. Beznec/Speer/Stojić Mitrović 2016; Greenberg/Spasić 2017; Kasparek 2016: 6), migrants in other states like North Macedonia, Croatia, and Slovenia were literally in the corridor's power, i.e. forced to follow the corridor (see Hameršak/Pleše 2018; Beznec/Speer/Stojić Mitrović 2016; Chudoska Blazhevska/Flores Juberías 2016: 231–232; Kogovšek Šalamon 2016: 44–47; Petrović 2018). The corridor was operative in different and constantly changing modalities until March 2016. Since then, migration through the Balkan region still takes place, with migrants struggling on a

daily basis with the diverse means of tightened border controls that all states along the Balkan route have been practicing since.

This *movements* issue wants to look back on these events in an attempt to analytically make sense of them and to reflect on the historical rupture of the months of 2015 and 2016. At the same time, it tries to analyze the ongoing developments of bordering policies and the struggles of migration. It assembles a broad range of articles reaching from analytical or research based papers shedding light on various regional settings and topics, such as the massive involvement of humanitarian actors or the role of camp infrastructures, to more activist-led articles reflecting on the different phases and settings of pro-migrant struggles and transnational solidarity practices. In an attempt to better understand the post-2015 border regime, the issue furthermore presents analyses of varying political technologies of bordering that evolved along the route in response to the mass mobilities of 2015/2016. It especially focuses on the excessive use of different dimensions of violence that seem to characterize the new modalities of the border regime, such as the omnipresent practice of push-backs. Moreover, the articles shed light on the ongoing struggles of transit mobility and (transnational) solidarity that are specifically shaped by the more than eventful history of the region molded both by centuries of violent interventions and a history of connectivity.

Our transnational editorial group came together in the course of a summer school on the border regime in the Balkans held in Belgrade, Serbia, in 2018. It was organized by the *Network for Critical Migration and Border Regime Studies* (kritnet), University of Göttingen, Department of Cultural Anthropology/European Ethnology (Germany), the Research Centre of the Academy of Sciences and Arts (Slovenia), the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research (Croatia), and the Institute of Ethnography SASA (Serbia). The summer school assembled engaged academics from all over the region that were involved, in one form or another, in migration struggles along the route in recent years.[1] The few days of exchange proved to be an exciting and fruitful gathering of critical migration and border regime scholars and activists from different regional and disciplinary backgrounds of the wider Balkans. Therefore, we decided

to produce this *movements* issue by inviting scholars and activists from the region or with a deep knowledge on, and experience with, regional histories and politics in order to share their analyses of the Balkan route, the formalized corridor, and the developments thereafter. These developments have left a deep imprint on the societies and regional politics of migration, but they are very rarely taken into consideration and studied in the West as the centuries long entanglements that connect the Balkan with the rest of Europe.

In this editorial, we will outline the transnational mobility practices in the Balkans in a historical perspective that includes the framework of EU-Balkan relations. With this exercise we try to historize the events of 2015 which are portrayed in many academic as well as public accounts as ›unexpected‹ and ›new‹. We also intend to write against the emergency and escalation narrative underlying most public discourses on the Balkans and migration routes today, which is often embedded in old cultural stereotypes about the region. We, furthermore, write against the emergency narrative because it erodes the agency of migration that has not only connected the region with the rest of the globe but is also constantly reinventing new paths for reaching better lives. Not only the history of mobilities, migrations, and flight connecting the region with the rest of Europe and the Middle East can be traced back into the past, but also the history of political interventions and attempts to control these migrations and mobilities by western European states. Especially the EU accession processes produce contexts that made it possible to gradually integrate the (Western) Balkan states into the rationale of EU migration management, thus, setting the ground for today's border and migration regime. However, as we will show in the following sections, we also argue against simplified understandings of the EU border regime that regard its externalization policy as an imperial top-down act. Rather, with a postcolonial perspective that calls for decentering western knowledge, we will also shed light on the agency of the national governments of the region and their own national(ist) agendas.

THE FORMALIZED CORRIDOR

As outlined above, the formalized corridor of 2015 reached from Greece to Northern and Central Europe, leading across the states established in the 1990s during the violent breakdown of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and, today, are additionally stratified vis-à-vis the EU. Slovenia and Croatia are EU member states, while the others are still in the accession process. The candidate states Serbia, North Macedonia and Montenegro have opened the negotiation process. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo—still not recognized as a sovereign state by Serbia and some EU

member states—have the status of potential candidates. However, in 2015 and 2016, the states along the corridor efficiently collaborated for months on a daily basis, while, at the same time, fostering separate, sometimes conflicting, migration politics. Slovenia, for example, raised a razor-wire fence along the border to Croatia, while Croatia externalized its border to Serbia with a bilateral agreement (Protokol) in 2015 which stated that the »Croatian Party« may send a »train composition with its crew to the railway station in Šid [in Serbia], with a sufficient number of police officers of the Republic of Croatia as escort« (Article 3 Paragraph 2).

Despite ruptures and disputes, states nevertheless organized transit in the form of corridor consisting of trains, buses, and masses of walking people that were guarded and directed by the police who forced people on the move to follow the corridor's direction and speed. The way the movements were speedily channeled in some countries came at the cost of depriving people of their liberty and freedom of movement, which calls for an understanding of the corridor as a specific form of detention: a mobile detention, ineligible to national or EU legislation (see Hameršak/Pleše 2018; Kogovšek Šalamon 2016: 44–47). In the context of the corridor, camps became convergence points for the heterogeneous pathways of movements. Nevertheless, having in mind both the proclaimed humanitarian purpose of the corridor, and the monumental numbers of people to whom the corridor enabled and facilitated movement, the corridor can be designated as an unprecedented formation in recent EU history. In other words: »The corridor – with all its restrictions – remains a historical event initiated by the movement of people, which enabled thousands to reach central Europe in a relatively quick and safe manner. [...] But at the same time it remained inscribed within a violent migration management system« (Santer/Wriedt 2017: 148).

For some time, a broad consensus can be observed within migration and border studies and among policy makers that understands migration control as much more than simply protecting a concrete borderline. Instead, concepts such as migration management (Oelgemoller 2017; Geiger/Pécoud 2010) and border externalization (as specifically spelled out in the EU document *Global Approach to Migration* of 2005) have become increasingly important. In a spatial sense, what many of them have in common is, first, that they assume an involvement of neighboring states to govern migration in line with EU migration policies. Second, it is often stated that this leads to the creation of different zones encircling the European Union (Andreas/Snyder 2000). Maribel Casas-Cortes and Sebastian Cobarrubias, for instance, speak of four such zones: the first zone is »formed by EU member states, capable of fulfilling Schengen standards«, the second zone »consists of transit countries« (Casas-Cortes/Cobarrubias 2019), the third zone is characterized by countries such as Turkey, which are depicted by emigration as well as transit, and the fourth zone are

countries of origin. While Casas-Cortes and Cobarrubias rightly criticize the static and eurocentric perspective of such conceptualizations, they nevertheless point to the unique nature of the formalized corridor because it crisscrossed the above mentioned zones of mobility control in an unprecedented way.

Furthermore, the corridor through the Balkans can be conceived as a special type of transnational, internalized border. The internalized European borders manifest themselves to a great extent in a punctiform (see Rahola 2011: 96–97). They are not only activated in formal settings of border-crossings, police stations, or detention centers both at state borders and deep within state territories, but also in informal settings of hospitals, hostels, in the streets, or when someone's legal status is taken as a basis for denying access to rights and services (i.e. to obtain medical aid, accommodation, ride) (Guild 2001; Stojić Mitrović/Meh 2015). With the Balkan corridor, this punctiform of movement control was, for a short period, fused into a linear one (Hameršak/Pleše 2018).

The rules of the corridor and its pathways were established by formal and informal agreements between the police and other state authorities, and the corridor itself was facilitated by governmental, humanitarian, and other institutions and agencies. Cooperation between the countries along the route was fostered by representatives of EU institutions and EU member states. It would be too simple, though, to describe their involvement of the countries along the route as merely reactive, as an almost mechanical response to EU and broader global policies. Some countries, in particular Serbia, regarded the increasing numbers of migrants entering their territory during the year 2015 as a window of opportunity for showing their ›good face‹ to the European Union by adopting ›European values‹ and, by doing so, for enhancing their accession process to the European Union (Beznec/Speer/Stojić Mitrović 2016; Greenberg/Spasić 2017). As Tošić points out, »this image was very convenient for Serbian politicians in framing their country as ›truly European‹, since it was keeping its borders open unlike some EU states (such as Hungary)« (2017: 160). Other states along the corridor also played by their own rules from time to time: Croatia, for example, contrary to the Eurodac Regulation (Regulation EU No 603/2013), avoided sharing registration data on people in transit and, thus, hampered the Dublin system that is dependent on Eurodac registration. Irregular bureaucracies and nonrecording, as Katerina Rozakou (2017) calls such practices in her analysis of bordering practices in the Greek context, became a place of dispute, negotiations, and frustrations, but also a clear sign of the complex relationships and different responses to migration within the European Union migration management politics itself.

Within EU-member states, however, the longer the corridor lasted, and the more people passed through it, the stronger the ›Hungarian position‹ became. Finally, Aus-

tria became the driving force behind a process of gradually closing the corridor, which began in November 2015 and was fully implemented in March 2016. In parallel, Angela Merkel and the European Commission preferred another strategy that cut access to the formalized corridor and that was achieved by adopting a treaty with Turkey known as the »EU-Turkey deal« signed on 18 March 2016 (see Speer 2017: 49–68; Weber 2017: 30–40).

The humanitarian aspect for the people on the move who were supposed to reach a safe place through the corridor was the guiding principle of public discourses in most of the countries along the corridor. In Serbia, »Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić officially welcomed refugees, spoke of tolerance, and compared the experience of refugees fleeing war-torn countries to those of refugees during the wars of Yugoslav Succession« (Greenberg/Spasić 2017: 315). Similar narratives could also be observed in other countries along the corridor, at least for some period of time (see, for Slovenia, Sardelić 2017: 11; for Croatia, Jakešević 2017: 184; Bužinkić 2018: 153–154). Of course, critical readings could easily detect the discriminatory, dehumanizing, securitarizing, and criminalizing acts, practices, tropes, and aspects in many of these superficially caring narratives. The profiling or selection of people, *ad hoc* detentions, and militarization—which were integral parts of the corridor—were, at the time, only denounced by a few NGOs and independent activists. They were mostly ignored, or only temporarily acknowledged, by the media and, consequently, by the general public.

Before May 2015, ›irregular‹ migration was not framed by a discourse of ›crisis‹ in the countries along the route, rather, the discourse was led by a focus on ›separate incidents‹ or ›situations‹. The discursive framing of ›crisis‹ and ›emergency‹, accompanied by reports of UN agencies about ›unprecedented refugee flows in history‹, has been globally adopted both by policy makers and the wider public. »In the wake of the Summer of Migration, all involved states along the Balkan route were quick to stage the events as an ›emergency‹ (Calhoun 2004) and, in best humanitarian fashion, as a major humanitarian ›crisis‹, thus legitimizing a ›politics of exception‹« (Hess/Kasparek 2017: 66). Following the logic that extraordinary situations call for, and justify, the use of extraordinary measures, the emergency framework, through the construction of existential threats, resulted, on the one hand, in a loosely controlled allocation of resources, and, on the other hand, in silencing many critical interpretations, thus allowing various ›risk management activities‹ to happen on the edge of the law (Campesi 2014). For the states along the route, the crisis label especially meant a rapid infusion of money and other resources for establishing infrastructures for the urgent reception of people on the move, mainly deriving from EU funds. Politically

and practically, these humanitarian-control activities also fastened the operational in-
clusion of non-EU countries into the European border regime.

As Sabine Hess and Bernd Kasparek have pointed out, the politics of proclaim-
ing a ›crisis‹ is at the heart of re-stabilizing the European border regime, »making
it possible to systematically undermine and lever the standards of international and
European law without serious challenges to date« (Hess/Kasparek 2017: 66). The
authors:

> »have observed carefully designed policy elements, which can be la-
> belled as anti-litigation devices. The design of the Hungarian transit
> zones is a striking case in point. They are an elementary part of the bor-
> der fence towards Serbia and allow for the fiction that the border has not
> been closed for those seeking international protection, but rather that
> their admission numbers are merely limited due to administrative rea-
> sons: each of the two transit zones allows for 14 asylum seekers to enter
> Hungary every day« (Hess/Kasparek 2017: 66; on the administrative
> rationale in Slovenia see e.g. Gombač 2016: 79–81).

The establishment of transit zones was accompanied by a series of legislative tighten-
ings, passed under a proclaimed ›crisis situation caused by mass immigration‹, which,
from a legal point of view, lasts until today. Two aspects are worth mentioning in par-
ticular: First, the mandatory deportation of all unwanted migrants that were detected
on Hungarian territory to the other side of the fence, without any possibility to claim
for asylum or even to lodge any appeal against the return. Second, the automatic re-
jection of all asylum applications as inadmissible, even of those who managed to en-
ter the transit zones, because Serbia had been declared a safe third country (Nagy/Pál
2018). This led to a completely securitized border regime in Hungary, which might
become a ›role model‹, not only for the countries in the region but also for the Euro-
pean border regime as a whole (ECtHR – Ilias and Ahmed v. Hungary Application
No. 47287/15).

THE LONG GENEALOGY
OF THE BALKAN ROUTE AND ITS GOVERNANCE

The history of the Balkan region is a multiply layered history of transborder mo-
bilities, migration, and flight reaching back as far as the times of the Habsburg and
Ottoman empires connecting the region with the East and Western Europe in many
ways. Central transportation and communication infrastructures partially also used

by today's migratory projects had already been established at the heydays of Western imperialism, as the Orient Express, the luxury train service connecting Paris with Istanbul (1883), or the Berlin-Baghdad railway (built between 1903 and 1940) indicate. During World War II, a different and reversed refugee route existed, which brought European refugees not just to Turkey but even further to refugee camps in Syria, Egypt, and Palestine and was operated by the Middle East Relief and Refugee Administration (MERRA).

The Yugoslav highway, the Highway of Brotherhood and Unity (Autoput bratstva i jedinstva) often simply referred to as the ›autoput‹ and built in phases after the 1950s, came to stretch over more than 1,000 km from the Austrian to the Greek borders and was one of the central infrastructures enabling transnational mobilities, life projects, and exile. In the 1960s, direct trains departing from Istanbul and Athens carried thousands of prospective labor migrants to foreign places in Germany and Austria in the context of the fordist labor migration regime of the two countries. At the end of that decade, Germany signed a labor recruitment agreement with Yugoslavia, fostering and formalizing decades long labor migrations from Croatia, Serbia, and other countries to Germany (Gatrell 2019, see e.g. Lukić Krstanović 2019: 54–55).

The wars in the 1990s that accompanied the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and the consequent establishment of several new nation states, created the first large refugee movement after the Second World War within Europe and was followed by increasing numbers of people fleeing Albania after the fall of its self-isolationist regime and the (civil) wars in the Middle East, Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan since the mid-1990s. As the migratory route did not go north through the Balkan Peninsula, but mainly proceeded to Italy at the time, the label *Balkan route* was mostly used as a name for a drugs and arms smuggling route well known in the West. Although there was migration within and to Europe, the Balkan migratory route, with the exception of refugee movements from ex-Yugoslavia, was yet predominantly invisible to the broader European public.

Sparse ethnographic insights from the beginning of the 2000s point this out. Academic papers on migrant crossings from Turkey to the island of Lesbos mention as follows: »When the transport service began in the late 1980s it was very small and personal; then, in the middle of the 1990s, the Kurds began to show up – and now people arrive from just about everywhere« (Tsianos/Hess/Karakayali 2009: 3; see Tsianos/Karakayali 2010: 379). A document of the Council of the European Union from 1997 formulates this as following:

> »This migration appears to be routed essentially either through Turkey,
> and hence through Greece and Italy, or via the ›Balkans route‹, with the

final countries of destination being in particular Germany, the Nether-
lands and Sweden. Several suggestions were put forward for dealing
with this worrying problem, including the strengthening of checks at
external borders, the stepping up of the campaign against illegal immi-
gration networks, and pre-frontier assistance and training assignments
in airports and ports in certain transit third countries, in full cooperation
with the authorities in those countries« (ibid. quoted in Hess/Kasparek
2020).

During this time, the EU migration management policies defined two main objectives:
to prevent similar arrivals in the future, and to initiate a system of control over migra-
tion movements toward the EU that would be established outside the territories of the
EU member states. This would later be formalized, first in the 2002 *EU Action Plan
on Illegal Immigration* (see Hayes/Vermeulen 2012: 13–14) and later re-confirmed
in the *Global Approach to Migration* (2005) framework concerning the cooperation
of the EU with third states (Hess/Kasparek 2020). In this process, the so-called mi-
gratory routes-approach and accompanying strategies of controlling, containing, and
taming the movement »through epistemology of the route« (Hess/Kasparek 2020) be-
came a main rationale of the European border control regime. Thus, one can resume
that the route was not only produced by movements of people but also by the logic,
legislation, investment etc. of EU migration governance. Consequently, the clan-
destine pathways across the Balkans to Central and Western Europe were frequently
addressed by security bodies and services of the EU (see e.g. Frontex 2011; Fron-
tex 2014), resulting in the conceptual and practical production of the Balkan as an
external border zone of the EU.

Parallel to the creation of ›Schengenland‹, the birth of the ›Area of Freedom, Secu-
rity and Justice‹ *inter alia* as an inner-EU-free-mobility-zone and EU-based European
border and migration regime in the late 1990s, the EU created the Western Balkans as
an imaginary political entity, an object of its neighborhood and enlargement policy,
which lies just outside the EU with a potential ›European future‹. For the purpose of
the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) initiated in 1999, the term Western
Balkan was launched in the EU political context in order to include, at that moment,
›ex-Yugoslav states minus Slovenia plus Albania‹ and to presumably avoid potential
politically sensitive notions. The Western Balkans as a concept represents a combi-
nation of a political compromise and colonial imagery (see Petrović 2012: 21–36).
Its aim was to stabilize the region through a radical redefinition that would restrain
from ethno-national toponyms and to establish a free-trade area and growing part-
nership with the EU. The SAP set out common political and economic goals for the

Western Balkan as a region and conducted political and economic progress evaluations ›on a countries' own merits‹. The Thessaloniki Summit in 2003 strengthened the main objectives of the SAP and formally took over elements of the accession process—institutional domains and regulations that were to be *harmonized* with those existing in the EU. Harmonization is a wide concept, and it basically means adopting institutional measures following specific demands of the EU. It is a highly hierarchized process in which states asked to ›harmonize‹ do not have a say in things but have to conform to the measures set forth by the EU. As such, the adoption of the EU migration and border regime became a central part of the ongoing EU-accession process that emerged as the main platform and governmental technology of the early externalization and integration of transit and source countries into the EU border regime. This was the context of early bilateral and multilateral cooperation on this topic (concerning involved states, see Lipovec Čebron 2003; Stojić Mitrović 2014; Županić-Iljić 2013; Bojadžijev 2007).

The decisive inclusion of the Western Balkan states in the EU design of border control happened at the Thessaloniki European Summit in 2003, where concrete provisions concerning border management, security, and combating illegal migration were set according to European standards. These provisions have not been directly displayed, but were concealed as part of the package of institutional transformations that respective states had to conduct. The states were promised to become members of the EU if the conditions were met. In order to fulfill this goal, prospective EU member states had to maintain good mutual relations, build statehoods based on ›the rule of law‹, and, after a positive evaluation by the EU, begin with the implementation of concrete legislative and institutional changes on their territories (Stojić Mitrović/Vilenica 2019). The control of unwanted movements toward the EU was a priority of the EU accession process of the Western Balkan states from the very beginning (Kacarska 2012). It started with controlling the movement of their own nationals (to allow the states to be removed from the so-called Black Schengen list) during the visa facilitation process. If they managed to control the movement of their own nationals, especially those who applied for asylum in the EU via biometric passports and readmission obligations (asylum seekers from these states comprise a large portion of asylum seekers in the EU even today), they were promised easier access to the EU as an economic area. Gradually, the focus of movement control shifted to third-country nationals. In effect, the Western Balkan states introduced migration-related legislative and institutional transformations corresponding to the ones already existing in the EU, yet persistent ›non-doing‹ (especially regarding enabling access to rights and services for migrants) remained a main practice of deterrence (Valenta/Zuparic-Iljic/Vidovic 2015; Stojić Mitrović 2019).

From the very beginning, becoming an active part of the European border regime and implementing EU-centric migration policies, or, to put it simply, conducting control policies over the movements of people, has not been the goal of the states along the Balkan route *per se* but a means to obtain political and economic benefits from the EU. They are included into the EU border regime as operational partners without formal power to influence migration policies. These states do have a voice, though, not only by creating the image of being able to manage the ›European problem‹, and accordingly receive further access to EU funds, but also by influencing EU migration policy through disobedience and actively avoiding conformity to ›prescribed‹ measures. A striking example of creative state disobedience are the so-called 72-hour-papers, which are legal provisions set by the Serbian 2007 Law on Asylum, later also introduced as law in North Macedonia in June 2015: Their initial function was to give asylum seekers who declared their ›intention to seek asylum‹ to the police the possibility to legally proceed to one of the asylum reception centers located within Serbia, where, in a second step, their asylum requests were to be examined in line with the idea of implementing a functioning asylum system according to EU standards. However, in practice, these papers were used as short-term visas for transiting through North Macedonia and Serbia that were handed out to hundreds of thousands of migrants (Beznec/Speer/Stojić Mitrović 2016: 17–19, 36).

Furthermore, the introduction of migration control practices is often a means for achieving other political and economic goals. In the accessing states, migration management is seen as services they provide for the EU. In addition, demands created by migration management goals open new possibilities for employment, which are essential to societies with high unemployment rates.

Besides direct economic benefits, migration has been confirmed to be a politically potent instrument. States and their institutions were more firmly integrated into existing EU structures, especially those related to the prevention of unwanted migration, such as increased police cooperation and Frontex agreements. On a local level, political leaders have increasingly been using migration-related narratives in everyday political life in order to confront the state or other political competitors, often through the use of Ethno-nationalist and related discourses. In recent times, as citizens of the states along the Balkan route themselves migrate in search for jobs and less precarious lives, migration from third states has been discursively linked to the fear of foreigners permanently settling in places at the expense of natives.

CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

According to a growing body of literature (e.g. Hess/Kasparek 2020; Lunaček Bru-
men/Meh 2016; Speer 2017), the Balkan route of the year 2015 and the first months
of 2016 can be conceptualized in phases, beginning with a clandestine phase, evolv-
ing to an open route and formalized corridor and back to an invisible route again. It
is necessary to point to the fact that these different phases were not merely the result
of state or EU-led top-down approaches, but the consequence of a »dynamic process
which resulted from the interplay of state practices, practices of mobility, activities
of activists, volunteers, and NGOs, media coverage, etc. The same applies for its
closure« (Beznec/Speer/Stojić Mitrović 2016: 6).

The closure of the corridor and stricter border controls resulted in a large trans-
formation of the Balkan route and mobility practices in the recent years, when push-
backs from deep within the EU-territory to neighboring non-EU states, erratic move-
ments across borders and territories of the (Western) Balkan states, or desperate jour-
neys back to Greece and then back to the north became everyday realities. In the
same period, the route proliferated into more branches, especially a new one via
Bosnia and Herzegovina. This proliferation lead to a heightened circulation of prac-
tices, people, and knowledge along these paths: a mushrooming of so-called ›jungle
camps‹ in Bosnia and Herzegovina, an escalation of border violence in Croatia, chain
push-backs from Slovenia, significant EU financial investments into border control in
Croatia and camp infrastructures in neighboring countries, the deployment of Fron-
tex in Albania, etc. As the actual itineraries of people on the move multiplied, people
started to reach previously indiscernible spots, resulting in blurring of the differences
between entering and exiting borders. Circular transit with many loops, involving
moving forward and backwards, became the dominant form of migration movements
in the region. It transformed the Balkan route into a »Balkan Circuit« (Stojić Mitro-
vić/Vilenica 2019: 540; see also Stojić Mitrović/Ahmetašević/Beznec/Kurnik 2020).
The topography changed from a unidirectional line to a network of hubs, accom-
modation, and socializing spots. In this landscape, some movements still remain
invisible—undetected by actors aiming to support, contain, and even prevent migra-
tion. »We have no information about persons who have money to pay for the whole
package, transfer, accommodation, food, medical assistance when needed, we have
no idea how many of them just went further«, a former MSF employee stressed, »we
only see those who reach for aid, who are poor or injured and therefore cannot imme-
diately continue their journey.« Some movements are intentionally invisibilized by
support groups in order to avoid unwanted attention, and, consequently, repressive
measures have also become a common development in border areas where people

on the move are waiting for their chance to cross. However, it seems that circular transnational migration of human beings, resulting directly from the securitarian practices of the European border regime, have also become a usual form of mobility in the region.

The Balkan route as a whole has been increasingly made invisible to spectators from the EU in the last years. There were no mass media coverage, except for reports on deplorable conditions in certain hubs, such as Belgrade barracks (Serbia), Vučjak camp (Bosnia and Herzegovina), or violent push-backs from Croatia that received global and EU-wide attention. However, this spectacularization was rarely directly attributed to the externalization of border control but rather more readily linked to an presumed inability of the Balkan states to manage migration, or to manage it without the blatant use of violence.

As Marta Stojić Mitrović and Ana Vilenica (2019) point out, practices, discourses, knowledge, concepts, technologies, even particular narratives, organizations, and individual professionals are following the changed topography. This is evident both in the securitarian and in the humanitarian sector: Frontex is signing or initiating co-operation agreements with non-EU member Balkan states, border guards learn from each other how to prevent movements or how to use new equipment, obscure Orbanist legislative changes and institutionalized practices are becoming mainstream, regional coordinators of humanitarian organizations transplant the same ›best practices‹ how to work with migrants, how to organize their accommodation, what aid to bring and when, and how to ›deal‹ with the local communities in different nation-states, while the emergency framework travels from one space to another. Solidarity groups are networking, exchanging knowledge and practices but simultaneously face an increased criminalization of their activities. The public opinion in different nation states is shaped by the same dominant discourses on migration, far-right groups are building international cooperations and exploit the same narratives that frame migrants and migration as dangerous.

ABOUT THE ISSUE

This issue of *movements* highlights the current situation of migration struggles along this fragmented, circular, and precarious route and examines the diverse attempts by the EU, transnational institutions, countries in the region, local and interregional structures, and multiple humanitarian actors to regain control over the movements of migration after the official closure of the humanitarian-securitarian corridor in 2016. It reflects on the highly dynamic and conflicting developments since 2015 and their

historical entanglements, the ambiguities of humanitarian interventions and strategies of containment, migratory tactics of survival, local struggles, artistic interventions, regional and transnational activism, and recent initiatives to curb the extensive practices of border violence and push-backs. In doing so, the issue brings back the region on the European agenda and sheds light on the multiple historical disruptions, bordering practices, and connectivities that have been forming its presence.

EU migration policy is reaffirming old and producing new material borders: from border fences to document checks—conducted both by state authorities and increasingly the general population, like taxi drivers or hostel owners—free movement is put in question for all, and unwanted movements of migrants are openly violently prevented. Violence and repression toward migrants are not only normalized but also further legalized through transformations of national legislation, while migrant solidarity initiatives and even unintentional facilitations of movement or stay (performed by carriers, accommodation providers, and ordinary citizens) are increasingly at risk of being criminalized.

In line with this present state, only briefly tackled here, a number of contributions gathered in this issue challenge normative perceptions of the restrictive European border regime and engage in the critical analysis of its key mechanisms, symbolic pillars, and infrastructures by framing them as complex and depending on context. Furthermore, some of them strive to find creative ways to circumvent the dominance of linear or even verbal explication and indulge in narrative fragments, interviews, maps, and graphs. All contributions are focused and space- or even person-specific. They are based on extensive research, activist, volunteer or other involvement, and they are reflexive and critical towards predominant perspectives and views.

Artist and activist **Selma Banich**, in her contribution entitled »Shining«, named after one of her artistic intervention performed in a Zagreb neighborhood, assembles notes and reflections on her ongoing series of site-specific interventions in Zagreb made of heat sheet (hallmarks of migrants' rescue boats and the shores of Europe) and her personal notes in which she engages with her encounters with three persons on the move or, rather, on the run from the European border control regime. Her contribution, formulated as a series of fragments of two parallel lines, which on the surface seem loosely, but in fact deeply, connected, speaks of the power of ambivalence and of the complexities of struggles that take place everyday on the fringes of the EU. **Andrea Contenta** visualizes and analyzes camps that have been mushrooming in Serbia in the recent years with a series of maps and graphs. The author's detailed analysis—based on a critical use of available, often conflicting, data—shows how Serbia has kept thousands of people outside of the western EU territory following a European strategy of containment. Contenta concludes his contribution with a

clear call, stating: »It is not only a theoretical issue anymore; containment camps are all around us, and we cannot just continue to write about it.« Serbia, and Belgrade in particular, is of central importance for transmigration through the Balkans. On a micro-level, the maps of **Paul Knopf**, **Miriam Neßler** and **Cosima Zita Seichter** visualize the so-called Refugee District in Belgrade and shed light on the transformation of urban space by transit migration. On a macro-level, their contribution illustrates the importance of Serbia as a central hub for migrant mobility in the Balkans as well as for the externalization of the European border regime in the region. The collective efforts to support the struggle of the people on the move—by witnessing, documenting, and denouncing push-backs—are presented by the **Push-Back Map Collective's** self-reflection. In their contribution to this issue, the Push-Back Map Collective ask themselves questions or start a dialogue among themselves in order to reflect and evaluate the Push-Back map (www.pushbackmap.org) they launched and maintain. They also investigate the potentials of political organizing that is based on making an invisible structure visible. The activist collective **Info Kolpa** from Ljubljana gives an account of push-backs conducted by the Slovenian police and describes initiatives to oppose what they deem as systemic violence of police against people on the move and violent attempts to close the borders. The text contributes to understanding the role of extralegal police practices in restoring the European border regime and highlights the ingenuity of collectives that oppose it. **Patricia Artimova's** contribution entitled »A Volunteer's Diary« could be described as a collage of diverse personal notes of the author and others in order to present the complexity of the Serbian and Bosnian context. The genre of diary notes allows the author to demonstrate the diachronic line presented in the volunteers' personal engagements and in the gradual developments occurring in different sites and states along the route within a four-year period. She also traces the effects of her support for people on the move on her social relations at home. **Emina Bužinkić** focuses on the arrest, detention, and deportation of a non-EU national done by Croatia to show the implications of current securitization practices on the everyday lives and life projects of migrants and refugees. Based on different sources (oral histories, official documentation, personal history, etc.), her intervention calls for direct political action and affirms a new genre one could provisionally call ›a biography of a deportation‹. In her »Notes from the Field« **Azra Hromadžić** focuses on multiple encounters between the locals of Bihać, a city located in the northwestern corner of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and people on the move who stop there while trying to cross into Croatia and the EU. Some of the sections and vignettes of her field notes are written as entries describing a particular day, while others are more anthropological and analytical reflections. Her focus lies on the local people's perspectives, the dynamics of their daily encounters with

migrants and alleged contradictions, philigram distinctions, as well as experiences of refugeeness that create unique relationships between people and histories in Bihać. **Karolína Augustová** and **Jack Sapoch**, activists of the grassroots organization No Name Kitchen and members of the Border Violence Monitoring Network, offer a systematized account of violence towards people on the move with their research report. The condensed analysis of violent practices, places, victims, and perpetrators of the increasingly securitized EU border apparatus is based on interviews conducted with people on the move in border areas with Croatia, Šid (Serbia) and Velika Kladuša (BiH). They identify a whole range of violence that people on the move are facing, which often remains ignored or underestimated, and thus condoned, in local national settings as well as on the EU and global level. They conclude that border violence against people on the move cannot be interpreted as mere aggression emanating from individuals or groups of the police but is embedded in the states' structures.

We also gathered scientific papers discussing and analyzing different aspects of the corridor and the years thereafter. In their article, **Andrej Kurnik** and **Barbara Beznec** focus on assemblages of mobility, which are composed of practices of migrants and local agencies that strive to escape what the authors call ›the sovereign imperative‹. In their analysis of different events and practices since 2015, they demonstrate how migratory movements reveal the hidden subalternized local forms of escape and invigorate the dormant critique of coloniality in the geopolitical locations along the Balkan route. In their concluding remarks, the authors ask to confront the decades-long investments into repressive and exclusionary EU migration policies and point to the political potential of migration as an agent of decolonization. The authors stress that post-Yugoslav European borderland that has been a laboratory of Europeanization for the last thirty years, a site of a ›civilizing‹ mission that systematically diminishes forms of being in common based on diversity and alterity is placed under scrutiny again. **Romana Pozniak** explores the ethnography of aid work, giving special attention to dynamics between emotional and rational dimensions. Based primarily on interviews conducted with humanitarians employed during the mass refugee transit through the Balkan corridor, she analyzes, historizes, and contextualizes their experiences in terms of affective labor. The author defines affective labor as efforts invested in reflecting on morally, emotionally, and mentally unsettling affects. She deals with local employment measures and how they had an impact on employed workers. Pozniak discusses the figure of the compassionate aid professional by it in a specific historical context of the Balkan corridor and by including personal narrations about it. The article of **Robert Rydzewski** focuses on the situation in Serbia after the final closure of the formalized corridor in March 2016. Rydzewski argues that extensive and multidirectional migrant movements on the doorstep of the EU are an

expression of hope to bring a ›stuckedness‹ to an end. In his analysis, he juxtaposes the representations of migrant movements as linear with migrant narratives and their persistent unilinear movement despite militarized external European Union borders, push-backs, and violence of border guards. Rydzewsky approaches the structural and institutional imposition of waiting with the following questions: What does interstate movement mean for migrants? Why do migrants reject state protection offered by government facilities in favor of traveling around the country? In her article, **Céline Cantat** focuses on the Serbian capital Belgrade and how ›solidarities in transit‹ or the heterogeneous community of actors supporting people on the move emerged and dissolved in the country in 2015/2016. She analyzes the gradual marginalization of migrant presence and migration solidarity in Belgrade as an outcome of imposing of an institutionalized, official, camp-based, and heavily regulated refugee aid field. This field regulates the access not only to camps per se, but also to fundings for activities by independent groups or civil sector organizations. **Teodora Jovanović**, by using something she calls ›autoethnography of participation‹, offers a meticulous case study of Miksalište, a distribution hub in Belgrade established in 2015, which she joined as a volunteer in 2016. The transformation of this single institution is examined by elaborating on the transformation within the political and social contexts in Serbia and its capital, Belgrade, regarding migration policies and humanitarian assistance. She identifies three, at times intertwined, modes of response to migration that have shaped the development of the Miksalište center in corresponding stages: voluntarism, professionalization, and re-statization. She connects the beginning and end of each stage of organizing work in Miksalište by investigating the actors, roles, activities, and manners in which these activities are conducted in relation to broader changes within migration management and funding.

Finishing this editorial in the aftermath of brutal clashes at the borders of Turkey and Greece and in the wake of the global pandemic of COVID-19—isolated in our homes, some of us even under curfew—we experience an escalation and normalization of restrictions, not only of movement but also of almost every aspect of social and political life. We perceive a militarization, which pervades public spaces and discourses, the introduction of new and the reinforcement of old borders, in particular along the line of EU external borders, a heightened immobilization of people on the move, their intentional neglect in squats and ›jungles‹ or their forceful encampment in deplorable, often unsanitary, conditions, where they are faced with food reductions, violence of every kind, and harrowing isolation. At the same time, we witness an increase of anti-migrant narratives not only spreading across obscure social networks but also among high ranked officials. Nonetheless, we get glimpses of resistance and struggles happening every day inside and outside the camps. Videos

of protests and photos of violence that manage to reach us from the strictly closed camps, together with testimonies and outcries, are fragments of migrant agency that exist despite overwhelming repression.

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Emina Bužinkić is a political activist examining the state and police violence against migrants and refugees, particularly concerning issues of border control and violence. Her work extends to understanding the inscriptions of border regimes in the field of schooling by researching the experiences of refugee and migrant students. She is currently obtaining her PhD in critical studies in education and human rights at the University of Minnesota in the United States. She is linked to the Centre for Peace Studies (*Centar za mirovne studije*), the Welcome! Initiative (*Inicijativa Dobrodošli!*), and the Taste of Home (*Okus doma*) in Croatia. Recently she has been

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Céline Cantat is a postdoctoral fellow at Sciences Po with H2020 project MAGYC-Migration Governance and Asylum Crises. Previously, Céline was a Marie-Curie Fellow at CEU, Budapest, studying migration solidarity groups along the Balkan route. She holds a PhD in Refugee Studies from the University of East London and is co-editor of *Refugee Protection and Civil Society in Europe* (Palgrave, 2018) and *Challenging the Political Across Borders: Migrants' and Solidarity Struggle* (CPS Book Series, 2019).

Andrea Contenta is an independent researcher and a humanitarian worker. After spending some years between Ethiopia, Kenya, and Sudan focusing on violence, conflicts and displacement, he decided to move to Belgrade following the Balkan corridor. Today he lives and works in Athens.

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Sabine Hess is professor at the Institute for Cultural Anthropology/European Ethnology, University of Göttingen, since 2011. Her main areas of research and teaching are migration and border regime studies, anthropology of policy with a focus on EU integration and processes of Europeanisation. She is a founding member of the online journal *movements* and of *kritnet* (Network for Critical Border and Migration Studies).

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Civil initiative **Info Kolpa** started in the spring of 2018 as a response to illegal actions of Slovene police, which started systematically denying people the right to seek asylum in Slovenia and pushing people back to Croatia. In the autumn of 2018, we established an informal telephone number for assistance to people wishing to seek asylum in Slovenia. The help we provided proved unsuccessful but with operating the number, we gained a lot of information on practice of push-backs on Slovene-Croatian border, which we presented to Slovene and international public.

Teodora Jovanović is as a research assistant at the Institute of Ethnography of SASA and a doctoral student of ethnology and anthropology at University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy. For her doctoral thesis, she conducted an ethnographic fieldwork in reception centers for asylum seekers in Serbia. Previously, she worked in »Miksalište« refugee aid center in Belgrade, and she was involved in »Refugees in Towns« project at Tufts University, Boston, as a local case study researcher.

Andrej Kurnik is assistant professor at Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana. He is a member of editorial board of Časopis za kritiko znanosti (Journal for Critique of Sciences).

Romana Pozniak is a PhD candidate with working experience in the humanitarian sector and an interest in the area of humanitarianism, biopolitics, refugee studies, and anthropology of labor. Her dissertation explores transformations, practices, and narratives of humanitarian work with migrants/refugees/asylum seekers in post-transitional Croatia. She works at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research in Zagreb.

The **Push-Back Map Collective** is a transnational group of people that come from different fields of radical politics like feminism, anti-capitalism, and anti-racist struggles. Its members are active in documenting and counteracting push-backs and violence at the internal and external(ised) borders of the EU. One main goal of the mapping project is to provide a platform for transnational, non-hierarchical, radical grassroots interventions and exchange.

Robert Rydzewski is a PhD candidate at the Department of Anthropology and Ethnology at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, Poland. Formerly, he held a scholarship at the Central European University in Budapest and was a Doctoral Fellow Researcher at the Wirth Institute for Austrian and Central European Studies at University of Alberta in Edmonton in Canada. His scientific interests are migration, civil society, transformations of post-Yugoslav cities. Currently, he is completing his PhD dissertation about the migrant movement in the Serbian part of the Balkan route.

Jack Sapoch is an activist affiliated with the NGO No Name Kitchen, where he co-ordinates the collection of push-back testimonies. In this capacity, he works in the wider Border Violence Monitoring Network—a joint-project organized by independent NGOs—to draw attention to the issue of border violence in the Western Balkans. He received his undergraduate degree from Bates College (USA) where he researched the institutional influences affecting refugee assistance in the ›barracks‹ of Belgrade in 2017.

Zita Seichter, **Miriam Neßler** and **Paul Knopf** met each other at Bauhaus-University Weimar in 2017. Today, they are studying Art and Architecture, Urban Studies as well as Human Geography and Regional Development in Weimar, Berlin and Eberswalde. Besides being interested in border regime practices in Belgrade and beyond, they are involved in activist and artistic contexts, researching and teaching on Solidarity Cities, the Right to the City, transformation strategies from a decolonizing perspective as well as art and architecture in the context of the Anthropocene. Related publication: Eckardt, Frank / Neßler, Miriam / Seichter, Zita (Hg.) (2019): Weit weg und unbeachtet. Stadt und Flüchtende in Belgrad seit Schließung der Balkanroute.

Marc Speer holds a degree in Sociology and is currently finalizing his PhD thesis on the *Humanitarian Border Regime* at the Institute for Cultural Anthropology/European Ethnology at the University of Göttingen, Germany. In addition he works for the research association bordermonitoring.eu, focusing in particular on the European border regime in South-Eastern Europe.

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