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Forced (Im)Mobilities *En Route*: ‘Justified’ Violence of the Border Regime in Balkans*

In this article, I explore the violent consequences of the post-2015 EU border regime for people from the Global South lingering through the Balkans. I intend to show that securing EU’s external borders through asylum and border management in Balkans is based on coercion and force, despite the efforts of the people on the move to transgress these borders and achieve decent lives. The efforts of people on the move to cross borders – which are officially closed for them – could be understood as force as well. Regardless of the legal status and ‘motives’ of displacement, people waiting and moving on the ‘Balkan route’ experience situations characterized by structural, direct, and cultural violence and respond to these situations in different ways. Pointing out to more or less hidden patterns of violence occurring at the EU’s external borders in the Balkans may challenge popular categorizations that at the same time oppress and protect people on the move. These patterns of violence are justified – but not justifiable – by the securitization of EU and national borders. By displacing violence as the so-called “push” factor from the countries of initial displacement (i.e. countries of the Global South), I aim to acknowledge that it continues to be perpetrated en route. Patterns of violence in the Balkans further produce forced mobilities and forced immobilities. People on the move cope with these forced (im)mobilities in different ways.

Key words: coercion, force, structural violence, border regime, migration

Присилна (не)кретања на путу: ‘правдано’ насиље граничног режима на Балкану

У чланку испитујем насилне последице граничног режима Европске уније након 2015. године по људе са глобалног Југа који се задржавају на Балкану. Намеравам да покажем да је обезбеђивање спољних граница Европске уније кроз управљање азилом и границама на Балкану засновано на принуди и сили, упркос напорима људи у покрету да прекораче те границе и достигну достојанствене животе. Напори људи у

* This paper is the result of (1) the research project The European Irregularized Migration Regime at the Periphery of the EU: From Ethnography to Keywords (Europski režim iregulariziranih migracija na periferiji EU: od etnografije do pojmovnika), ERIM, funded by Croatian Science Foundation (HRZZ IP-2019-04-6642) and (2) the work in the Institute of Ethnography SASA, financed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, Republic of Serbia (Agreement No. 451-03-9 / 2021-14 / 200173).

покрету да пређу границе – које су званично затворене за њих – такође могу да се разумеју као сила. Без обзира на то какви су им правни статуси и ‘мотиви’ расељавања, људи који чекају и крећу се ‘Балканском рутом’ проживљавају ситуације обојене структурним, директним и културним насиљем, и на различите начине реагују на те ситуације. Указивањем на мање или више скривене обрасце насиља који се јављају дуж спољних граница Европске уније на Балкану, могу се преиспитати популарне категоризације које, у исто време, угњетавају и штите људе у покрету. Ти обрасци насиља су правдани – али не и оправдани – секуритизацијом националних граница и граница Европске уније. Премештањем насиља као тзв. пуш фактора из земаља иницијалног поласка (тј. земаља глобалног Југа), намеравам да укажем да се насиље наставља током пута. Обрасци насиља на Балкану даље производе присилна кретања и присилна не-кретања. Људи у покрету се носе са тим присилним (не)кретањима на различите начине.

Кључне речи: принуда, сила, структурно насиље, гранични режим, миграције

Introduction

During one of my visits to the asylum centers in Serbia, I talked to a married couple from Iran waiting for the acceptance of asylum application. Since their English and my Farsi knowledge were insufficient to have a fluent conversation, their asylum center companion from Afghanistan, Aaqil,¹ helped us in mediation. Our conversation spontaneously led us towards the discussion about the securitization of borders, forced and voluntary migration, humanitarian protection, asylum, and agency. The husband, Yaser, was explaining to me how “all countries have the responsibility to keep the border, to keep the security, national security” and how the asylum procedure works in general: “when they arrive to some place, they [refugees] must apply for asylum. Because they [those who have the responsibility] close the border. They don’t allow to all refugees that they go to Europe. They can not trust all people”. Gohar, the wife, said: “They, Serbia, European Union, or some other country, must separate those who leave their country for economic issue and those who leave the country about religious problem or political problem, they must divide these two, separate these two issue”. Yaser shared that their asylum procedure takes a long time: “Especially in Serbia they accept single people and they don’t accept families. It takes a lot of time. It is easier for single people.” I asked if it is always that easy to separate these two “issues”. Yaser explained: “Most of people who stay here [asylum center], they all the time talk about better life, especially in Germany, in Europe, in European country. Because of this reason, we know that all of people who stay here they come just for economical issue. They all the time think about money [...] Real refugee never talk about this.” Gohar explained: “Most of the people here wait for money to go to other country. We don’t have any problem with these people.”

¹ All personal names have been changed.

Shortly afterward, our conversation was interrupted. Aaqil and I exchanged looks and smiled at each other. The two of us had different reasons for exchanging looks. We discussed them later. The claim that it is easier for “single people” affected him, because he was himself one of these people, meaning that he was currently alone on a journey, without partner, relatives or offsprings.² He felt called out, because his journey has been difficult. On the other hand, I was influenced by the narrative because of the idea that there is a clear-cut distinction between “refugees” and “economic migrants”. That idea has been occupying my academic attention.

This paper is an attempt to outline different and entangled forms of forced (im)mobilities along the EU’s external borders in Balkans linked with patterns of violence embedded in the securitization of migration. The ethnographic insights interpreted in this paper are selected from the ongoing research in Serbia that I have been conducting since 2018, but also from short-term field visits in Croatia. Ethnographic material has been collected through my PhD research and ERIM collective regional research project.³ The analysis in this paper is focused on Serbia, but some parallels are made with Croatia to show the connections composing the border regime in the Balkans. The ethnographic material includes semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, fieldwork notes, and secondary data. I have interviewed people on the move,⁴ representatives of governmental, non-governmental, and activist organizations, staff in schools in which children from reception and asylum centers are enrolled, and local population in towns where people on move are present. During the fieldwork, I have encountered many people and informally spoke to them. I have visited sites where people on the move reside, socialize, or spend time, including different kinds of official collective centers, informal settlements, asylum seekers’ homes, schools, humanitarian aid centers,

² “The word “single” refers to the status of migrants during their journey and does not necessary reflect marital status. “Singles” are young, male travelers in the migration jargon (cf. Rydzewski 2020, 75).

³ Research project “The European Irregularized Migration Regime at the Periphery of the EU: from Ethnography to Keywords” (ERIM) strives to document and analyse irregularized migrations in the transnational space formed by migratory movements that in various directions cross borders between Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia etc. Based on the multi-sited ethnographic research, research associates aim to encompass the levels and experiences of different agents. By distancing from the notion that the migration regime is a signifier of the abstract and monolithic power of the state, ERIM approaches the irregularized migration regime as a dynamic field of heterogeneous and even opposed practices and interactions of various actors that are articulated in specific ways on the peripheries of the EU (see <https://erim.ief.hr/en/>).

⁴ In this paper, I use the term “people on the move” to avoid dividing people according to their motives for migration (refugee/migrant binary logic) and to encompass people whose presence is both irregularized (“irregular”, “unregistered” foreigners) and regularized (asylum seekers, holders of refugee status/humanitarian protection/subsidiary protection).

parks, bus stations, cafes, and streets. These encounters and observations were documented in a fieldwork diary. Also, I have reviewed many reports, legal documents, and academic articles which contain valuable secondary data.

In the first subsection, I will question the theoretical meaning of force and coercion in critical forced migration and border regime studies. The notion of forced migration has been politicized and misused as a tool for the securitization of migration. I will present the line of argumentation that acknowledges the existence of violence and forceful constraints *en route*. Also, I will employ notions of agency and subjectivity to argue that cross-border movements are simultaneously subjects and objects of force. In the second subsection, I will address the securitization of migration and point out to instrumental character of violence, perpetrated in the name of security and care. The third subsection contains accounts of various spaces of containment in Serbia and Croatia that I have visited during the ethnographic fieldwork: asylum, (transit) reception, and detention centers. The encampment and asylum policies in the countries of the externalized EU border regime are a way to enforce immobility on people rather than to provide protection. Forced immobilities along the Balkans are heterogeneous, forming a continuum of containment. In the fourth subsection, I will map forms of forced movements within the border regime in the Balkans and the EU: forced relocations within the states, practices of ‘push-backs’, and lawful deportations. I will question whether the reactionary and autonomous practice of ‘game’ and the policies of assisted voluntary returns could be understood as forced mobilities as well. In conclusion, I will emphasize that both forced mobilities and immobilities are products of violence justified by the securitization of migration.

Questioning Force and Coercion in Forced Migration and Border Regime Studies

Coercion and force are undoubtedly among the most central concepts in the contemporary understanding of different ‘categories’ of migration, and specifically in the popular distinction between forced and voluntary migration. In this paper, I adopt the “enforcement approach” to coercion, which regards coercion as “a kind of activity by a powerful agent, which creates and then utilizes a significant disparity in power over another, in order to constrain or alter the latter’s possibilities for action”; through enforceable constraints, exemplified by the use of force and violence, the powerful agent aims to determine what the coerced agent will or will not do (see Anderson 2010). In order to distinguish force from violence and coercion, I use the definition of “force” as the energy released by physical or social movements (Arendt 1970, 44–45; Bufacchi 2005, 196). Both coercion and force are conceptually interwoven with the notion of violence, which is understood here as a vicious cycle (Galtung 1990) rather than an isolated act of physical violation.

Here, we may ask: what is the “force” that makes people move involuntarily? Where does this force start and end? The “force” that makes people move against their will is conventionally framed as a “well-founded fear of persecution” like it was defined by UNHCR in *the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of*

Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. In the framework of international protection, the reason for persecution must be connected to race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. People are granted with asylum when they “prove” that their “well-founded fear of persecution” is justified. Critically-oriented scholars researching forced migration have tried to go beyond seeing the reality through the lens of the UNHCR and expanded this understanding of force/coercion to other factors such as environmental catastrophes, accelerated development, material deprivation, hunger, and civil unrest (Glasman 2017, Zetter 2007). Others emphasized that *non-migration* may also be forced and introduced the concept of “involuntary immobility” (Lubkemann 2008).

Today, scholars mostly agree that elements of force and will exist in many mobilities along the forced-voluntary migration continuum, and that “categories” – such as “forced” and “voluntary” migration, which divide people on the move according to their motivations for displacement – are in fact employed to control and manage migration (e.g. Faist 2018, 419, Zetter 2007).⁵ Although the clear-cut distinction between forced and voluntary migration, often articulated as a distinction between refugees and economic migrants, has been disputed, it survives in many discourses about migration – academic, humanitarian, securitarian, legal, political, public, and populist in particular. Extracting academic knowledge from the narratives of people on the move suffering different kinds of violence could easily turn into exploitation of ‘voices’, perpetuating the framework of law and governance that demand from people to constantly give account of themselves (Cabot 2019, Khosravi 2018). Bearing in mind ethical and political risks of interpreting the narratives of people subjected to different forms of violence, I reflect upon gathered ethnographic material and academic interpretations as a set of contextual, situational, conflicted, incomplete and imperfect fragments of researched realities.

In the introductory vignette, I illustrated that this distinction forced/voluntary migration may be internalized by people on the move as well. This “binary logic”, grounded in the international refugee protection regime, has become a norm, repeatedly used to delegitimize the majority of contemporary transnational migration movements (Scheel, Garreli & Tazzioli 2015, 72). The “internalization of norms” by people subordinated by power does not necessarily imply acceptance of its’ terms, but brings to the fore the issues of subjectivity and agency (Butler 1997). Also, the economic/political migrant binary reflects an ideological presupposition of liberalism that disembods the ‘economic’ from the ‘political’ and makes ‘the economy’ appear as force-free (Apostolova 2016, 35). Coercive and voluntary factors are usually perceived regarding the initial moment of displacement, as if such moment exists as discrete and definitive point in time.

There have been attempts to interpret repatriation practices within the forced migration framework (e.g. Gibney 2013; Sökefeld 2020). These attempts are somehow ironic and paradoxical. The binary logic of migration management is

⁵ For a critique of conceptual relativization of force factor in forced migration see Mandić (2021).

challenged by using the same underpinning terminology. Gibney (2013) argued that, contrary to usual perception in migration scholarship, deportation could be understood as a form of forced migration; the practice of deportation as a lawful expulsion draws its legitimacy from law and the principles of liberal-statist world order. Sökefeld (2020) demonstrated that force plays multiple roles in the trajectories of people on the move and that ‘voluntariness’ of the so-called assisted voluntary return is also highly disputable because people could be unable to withstand the uncertainty and structural violence of refugee regimes, being in the “condition of deportability” (De Genova 2002). ‘Voluntariness’ of voluntary returns is performatively constructed by the principles of modern bureaucratic power and may be understood as “forced choice” (Cleton & Chauvin 2020).

I want to continue the line of argumentation that *displaces* the matters of force and coercion outside the initial moment of departure from the countries of the Global South, and beyond the classifications imposed by refugee protection regimes. As someone who encountered many people on their way to the EU, in countries that are commonly labeled as “transit”, I began to notice how they experience various kinds of force, coercion, and violence while being constantly blamed for opportunism – i.e. that they are illegitimate, economic migrants.

“Transit migration” and “transit countries” are highly politicized and blurred concepts as well (Düvell 2012). These concepts are politicized in a way that they reinforce the efforts of the EU to externalize migration control and integrate non-EU countries into the EU border regime. The formalization of the ‘transit’ corridor known as the ‘Balkan route’ was an attempt to regularize and impose control on transnational migration movements going from Turkey to Western and Central Europe, while the closure of the formalized corridor was largely perceived as the ultimate end to unwanted movements across the territories of Balkan states (Stojić Mitrović, Ahmetašević, Bezec & Kurnik 2020). Discourses around the ‘Balkan route’ and ‘Western Balkans’ countries represent a paradigmatic example of the politicization of transit. The border regime in Balkans is understood as a modality of the EU border regime (on the genealogy and contextualization of the Balkan route, see Hameršak, Hess, Speer & Stojić Mitrović 2020).⁶

In autonomy of migration theory, migration is portrayed as *a* force, equally as, or even more than *the subject of* force. The concept of border regimes was introduced as a critique of the concept of the Fortress of Europe, to encourage “thinking about borders no longer in metaphors of ‘walls’, but rather as highly perforated systems or regimes” (Tsianos and Karakayali 2010, 378). These perforated regimes are often disrupted by autonomous movements conceived as a collective force or collective agency (Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias & Pickles 2015, 899; see also Hess & Kasperek 2017, 60; Stojić Mitrović & Vilenica 2019, 553). Previous ethnographic research showed that despite the great efforts towards securing external (Rydzewski 2020) and internal (Fontanari 2017) borders of the EU through various forceful ac-

⁶ Migratory journeys are not merely linear movements from point A to point B (country of origin – transit – destination). Düvell (2012) points out that migrants often change paths and points of departure or arrival while they face new possibilities or barriers.

tions, people on the move persisted in challenging physical and symbolic borders. The *agency/subjectivity*, efforts and actions of people are also conceptualized as a force or released energy.

The notion of “agency” has been criticized for framing people on the move as atomized individual rational-choice actors confronting external structures, while the use of the term “subjectivity” may avoid individualistic and voluntaristic undertones (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015, 83). However, the notion of agency has been useful in debunking the myth of refugees as passive victims (Rivetti 2013, 307). Fontanari (2019) showed that it is possible to present protagonists neither as ‘rational choice actors’ nor ‘passive victims’. Agency as a conceptual tool sheds light on how people actively improvise and seek responses to restrictive immigration policies (López Marín & Lenti 2019; Korac 2020, 77–78). Both agency and subjectivity encompass efforts, practices, struggles, choices, capacities, and ways of coping with more or less imposed circumstances.

The analytical focus on the EU border regime thus shifts our attention to forceful constraints that people on the move have to cope with *during* their journeys. The dialectical positionality of structural constraints and subjectivity/agency turns people on the move “simultaneously into both object and subject of the border regimes” (Khosravi 2018, 2). The same kind of theoretical problem – the interaction of refugees’ agency and the political/legal structure of asylum – has been analyzed in studies focusing on refugees in particular (Rivetti 2013, 307). In discussing force and coercion, both within the framework of forced migration and border regime studies, the interaction of what *people do* and what *is being done to them* appears as an important theoretical puzzle. At the same time, as Khosravi (2018) notes, writing about subjectivity and agency of people on the move – in the context of the current anti-migration atmosphere, where border regimes are getting harsher and harsher – is ethically and politically challenging.

Securitization and Justification of Violence

As Yaser pointed out in the part of the interview quoted in the opening section, the policies of closed borders for people on the move is connected with security and trust. In literature, the process of framing and managing current transnational migration – mainly from the so-called Global South to the European Union and other countries of the so-called Global North – in terms of ‘risk’, ‘crisis’, ‘fear’, ‘threat’ and ‘danger’ is called securitization of migration (Bigo 2002, Huysmans 2006, Korac 2020). In Europe, the rise of political narratives about transnational migration as a cultural ‘danger’ could be traced back to 1970s and 1980s (Wright 1998). Building of ‘border-free’ Europe through the Schengen Agreement already in early 1990s meant reinforcing borders and control of the non-EU nationals through e.g. ‘readmission’ agreements and ‘safe third country’ rule (Collinson 1996, Hollifield 2004). The official integration of asylum and migration policy in the development of the internal security field occurred in the late 1990s, e.g. through the introduction of the *Area of Freedom, Security, and Justice* in the Treaty

of Amsterdam in 1997 (Huysmans 2006). The management of fear, connecting migration and asylum with security connotations of terrorism, drugs traffic, and organized crime, became more explicit, racialized, and genderized after the terrorist attack on the US of 11 September 2001 (Huysmans 2006, 71; Korac 2020, 77; Zorn 2021, 169). The political narratives concerning ‘illegal’ migration and human trafficking are another sign of the importance of security frameworks in the area of migration and asylum (Huysmans 2006, 68; see Scheel and Squire 2014). Finally, the events of 2015 are repetitively framed in terms of ‘crisis’ (Hameršak, Hess, Speer & Stojić Mitrović 2020, 9). After 2015, the narrative about transnational migration as a dangerous, suspicious ‘flow’ that needs to be properly controlled, and national and supra-national as fragile entities that need to be protected, became political and public focal point.

In this paper, I am mapping some patterns of violence, justified by the security of EU and national borders. However, it is misleading to reduce the notion of securitization of migration to border controls, expulsions, technologies of surveillance, policing of people on the move, military interventions at the borders, and repressive state apparatuses governing migration. As I indicated in the previous section, “discourses concerning the human rights of asylum seekers are de facto part of a securitization process if they play the game of differentiating between genuine asylum seekers and illegal migrants, helping the first by condemning the second and justifying border controls” (Bigo 2002, 79).

Therefore, I approach securitization as the *meta-narrative, justification, and rationale* of violent patterns occurring at the EU’s external borders in the Balkans. Because of its instrumental character, violence always needs justification through the end it pursues (Arendt 1970, 51). John Dewey’s essay on force and coercion, written on the eve of World War I, indicates that violence is an evaluative and moral concept, and opens the question of the justification of force. He suggested that the use of (physical) force may be justified if no other “means to an end” (including the law) are available – in that case, violence differs from the force. For him, violence is always unjustifiable, wasteful, or destructive, while coercion “occupies a middle place between power as energy [justified force] and power as violence [wasteful force]” (Dewey 1916, 365). Within Dewey’s approach, violence is conceptualized as “force gone wrong”, contrary to broader definitions of violence, which could be found in e.g. Johan Galtung’s work (Bufacchi 2005, 195). The act of direct or physical violence is only one manifestation or even a consequence of broader violence; violence could also be structural and cultural (Galtung 1990).

By using Galtung’s and related interpretations of violence in analyzing securitization, migration, and borders, we could observe lawful mechanisms through which violence becomes either hidden or legitimized (e.g. Isakjee, Davies, Obradović-Wochnik & Augustová 2020, Augustová 2021, Zorn 2021; on using Rob Nixon’s concept of “slow violence” in the analysis of the EU border regime see Schindel 2019). Certain practices of border control aiming to reduce migration, such as deportation (Gibney 2013, Bužinkić 2020), are not usually perceived as violent because they are lawful. In fact, liberal-democratic states, with the help of pri-

vate actors, can be engaged in *refoulement*, without the problematic implications in international law concerning asylum (Bloom and Risse 2014, 72).

The post-2015 European border regime is characterized not only by control and security, but by hybrid convergence of humanitarianism, human rights, and security, and contested by the agency of various actors or groups of actors (Hess & Kasperek 2017, Perkowski 2018). Globally, the establishment of camps for people on the move has been one of the key features of the securitarian-humanitarian logic. The practice of sheltering people on the move in strictly designated areas is often referred to as “encampment”. Encampment occurs as “states’ bureaucratic response to dealing with temporary *crises* where people are seen to be out of place, either *in a place of danger* or *creating danger* for others” (my emphasis; Bakewell 2014, 134). The main feature of securitarian-humanitarian logic is the fluctuation between two seemingly opposed objectives, compassion, and repression, or care and control – care for the basic biological needs, on the one hand, and control of movement, on the other hand (Fassin 2005, Petrović 2018). Care for endangered ‘basic human rights’ and control of migration as the potential ‘danger’ are inseparable principles in spaces where people on the move are encamped and contained.

Within the context of this research, the proliferation of encampment appeared as an emergency response to the 2015 ‘crisis’ and the formation of state-organized humanitarian corridor known as “the Balkan route”. During the gradual closure of the corridor, these facilities started to transform into spaces of longer containment (cf. Hameršak & Pleše 2018, 27; Stojić Mitrović & Vilenica 2019, 549). Securitarian practices of immigration control in the zones of containment make international protection (asylum) ineffective and restrain autonomy of migration (Lipovec Čebren & Zorn 2016).

Forcing Immobility through Containment of People on the Move

According to Hassan, a friend from Syria, ‘why did you leave your country’ and ‘do you want to stay here’ are the two questions that asylum seekers are most frequently asked in Serbia. He is irritated by these two questions because he feels that he always has to justify himself to someone, but also because they are too complex to answer. Fazal, a volunteer interpreter from Afghanistan in one of the asylum centers, told me that he is torn between going to ‘game’ (see next subsection) and staying in Serbia. His ‘tearing’ also shows that plans are changeable and that the ‘desire to stay’ is not relevant to people on the move as much as the possibility to act under circumstances.

During one of the interviews in asylum centers, I asked Hadi, an asylum seeker from Iran, one of the two annoying questions – whether he and his family want to stay here. He told me:

“For now, for before, for after, for future, we don’t have any more choice. Because every border is closed. First year we didn’t want to stay here. But we try two, three times go game, to another country, but our smuggler took all our money, 41 000 euros, and after that we

don't have any choice. We have to stay here for now. We will see for future.”

Hadi's feeling of the lack of choice points to the structural violence associated with waiting, encampment, and policies of containment. This answer also indicates that in the case of his family, “to stay” was the result of coercion rather than choice – they were *forced* to stay. The lack of legalized ways to continue the journey, and going to “game” with a “smuggler” who betrayed their trust had preceded the situation of *involuntary immobility* which befell them along the way.

Asylum centers are one kind of *camps* in Serbia. Official reception facilities for people on the move in Serbia are run by the Commissariat for Refugees and Migrations of the Republic of Serbia (CRMRS) and are officially divided into asylum and (transit or temporary) reception centers. In interviews and everyday speech, people on the move refer to both of these types of reception facilities as “camps” (although occupied informal settlements are also sometimes called “camps” by people on the move and authorities). The first type, asylum centers, were the dominant form of camps from the establishment of the national asylum system in 2007/2008 until the emergence of state-organized humanitarian corridor in 2015. The establishment of national policies and facilities concerning asylum were introduced in Serbia through the EU Accession process, and they are part of the efforts to externalize the EU border regime (Stojić Mitrović & Vilenica 2019). The asylum system in Serbia became a way to enforce immobility on people trying to access the asylum system in the EU, or at least to ‘slow down’ or confine the movements.

Asylum centers usually accommodate people who have expressed the intention to seek asylum (i.e. registered by authorized police officers of the Ministry of the Interior) and people entering the asylum procedure (asylum seekers) (see Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection, Article 35 and 36). During the registration process, a person has to express the intention to seek asylum, an authorized police officer takes photographs and fingerprints of a person, and issues a certificate of registration (Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection 2018, Article 35). Expressing the intention to seek asylum does not constitute the initiation of the asylum procedure, but it is a precondition for lodging the asylum application (Kovačević 2021, 31).

After lodging the application, asylum seekers wait to be interviewed. In practice, the waiting for an interview to be scheduled lasts from several weeks to several months (Kovačević 2021, 45–46). An authorized officer of the Asylum Office may interview asylum seeker several times “in order to establish the factual situation”, which refers to the “(1) the identity of the person; (2) the grounds on which his/her asylum application is based; (3) the asylum seeker movements after leaving his/her country of origin or habitual residence, and (4) whether the asylum seeker has already sought asylum in another country” (Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection 2018, Article 37). Since the entry into force of the Asylum Act in 2008, refuge and subsidiary protection status has been granted to less than 200 persons (Belgrade Centre for Human Rights 2021, 17). The low figures imply

that asylum seekers in Serbia face numerous obstacles to accessing asylum procedure (see Kovačević 2021, 11; Ahmetašević 2021, 14).

I have met several asylum seekers hoping to obtain asylum and work permits, so they can continue their life outside of the camps. Yaser explained that their waiting in the camp is driven by the hope for 'normal life': "Now we are in camp situation, now it is good, we are waiting an positive answer from asylum office, after that we are interested to rent a house in the city and continue our daily life, normal life". People often emphasized that they are bored and jobless; e.g. "camp life is tiring", said Nahida, a woman for Afghanistan.⁷

Although asylum seekers are entitled to work permits after nine months from the beginning of the asylum procedure, their job opportunities are mostly limited to employment in NGOs as interpreters/cultural mediators. In every reception center that I have visited, a few people were volunteering as interpreters, like Aaqil. These individuals have to prove themselves to get the benefits in form of clothing and other items, but also to be noticed by NGOs which are their potential employers. Asylum center employees who helped me to find interlocutors often directed me to these individuals. This was not only because these individuals are more fluent in English, but also because they have more benefits and therefore they are more satisfied with 'camp life'. Cultural mediators may be key players in the humanitarian–bordering strategy of governance since they are the ones standing between the authorities and people on the move (Spathopoulou, Kallio & Hakli 2021).

Transit reception centers are the second type of *camps* in Serbia. The proliferation of transit reception centers began in the context of the state-organized humanitarian corridor in 2015 and continued afterward. For example, Šid, a municipality and a town in Serbia close to the border with Croatia, became a space of hyper-mobility when the corridor in Serbia was redirected from Hungary towards Croatia in September 2015. At that point, thousands of people were transiting through Šid area and three transit-reception centers were opened. The employee of CRMRS working in one of these three centers explained that back then, around 3000 people per day were passing through the camp. After the closure of the corridor, the three transit-reception centers in Šid area remained opened as spaces of transit, sheltering, encampment, and containment for people on the move, who pass, linger and return to the border between Serbia and Croatia. In general, one can observe the living conditions in reception centers are scarce (especially in those along the borders and those where 'singles' are accommodated), which is often explained by the fact that these facilities were designed for a short-term stay during the existence of the corridor.

Reception centers are also places ensuring the semi-regularization of stay. The 'irregularity' emerges as a 'dangerous' aspect of identity that needs to be con-

⁷ That was her answer when I asked her if she is tired of our conversation. Her answer indicates that she understood my presence as the part of "camp life" as well. It is often unacknowledged that anthropological scholarship—itsself a business—is also part of the "Europe refugee regime" (Cabot 2019).

trolled. Šid residents that I talked to during fieldwork expressed the narrative that “the unregistered ones” or “those outside of the camps” are the trouble-makers. It is generally perceived that those who stay in reception centers are ‘legal’ and ‘registered’, while those who are outside are ‘illegal’ and ‘unregistered’ or ‘undocumented’. This perception is false in practice, especially in Šid area. It happens that people who did not express the intention to seek asylum (i.e. without a registration certificate) sleep in reception centers, and vice versa – the registered people sleep outside of the centers, which puts them in “legal limbo” (see Kovačević 2021, 33). Although the camp managements have internal databases of accommodated people, the reception centers are places ensuring semi-regularization. People are circulating across different kinds of collective facilities. For example, Aaqil was in a reception center, but when he applied for asylum, he was transferred to asylum center.

There is another type of facility where people on the move may end up in Serbia, which is not called a “camp”, but a “prison”. It is also a space of containment and an example of structural, legalized, and justified violence of the border regime in the Balkans. The Detention Centre for Foreigners in Padinska Skela is managed by the Ministry of Interior. The possibility of placing asylum seekers under detention in Serbia is prescribed by the Asylum Act (for an explanation of the legal framework of detention see Kovačević 2021, 96–99).⁸ Unlike camps, the freedom of movement in a detention center is completely restricted.

Similar facilities exist in Croatia. People on the move in both countries end up in detention centers if they, for example, enter the state territory without permission, are deemed to pose a threat to national security, wait for a removal order, deportation, or readmission (Belgrade Centre for Human Rights 2021, 42; Global Detention Project 2019, 10). An interlocutor working in the detention center in Croatia explained on which grounds people (officially referred to as ‘foreigners’) are detained or ‘accommodated’ there. The most common practice is containing ‘foreigners’ until the completion of the formal readmission procedure:

“Our center works in such a way that when the police station finds foreigners in the depths of the territory, it cannot return them immediately to the country they came from [in their case mostly Bosnia and Herzegovina]... So if they can’t immediately get them back where they came from, then they are accommodated with us”.

If the country from which a person entered Croatia does not accept him/her back, a return decision is issued, and “a deadline for *voluntary return*, so they have to leave the Republic of Croatia and European Economic Area (EEA)” is set. During the fieldwork visit in the COVID-19 setting, the center was empty. No ‘foreigners’ were ‘accommodated’ at that moment. As it has been noted, “there may not be many people placed in these centers because most non-citizens are simply pushed

⁸ In the Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection (2018, Article 78), this type of facility is called “reception centre for foreigners”, while in the Law on Foreigners (2018, Article 87) this facility is referred to as “detention centre”. This mismatch may be intentional or unintentional.

back at the border rather than detained” (Global Detention Project 2019, 22). This detention center, built in 2016, looked new, well maintained, and neat, with a minimalist interior and exterior design. Rooms contain nothing more than sheet metal furniture.

Although detention in Serbia is not widespread in practice, it is made possible by legal acts. The very fact that there are prisons for people on the move, inside which one could observe tally marks on the walls – drawn by the detained people to keep track of how long they have been there, along with inscriptions and messages in Arabic – shows that forced immobilities along the ‘Balkan route’ form a continuum of containment. The containment varies from ‘loose’ walls of informal settlements and reception centers ensuring semi-regularization, over protracted waiting periods in asylum centers, to total restriction of movement in detention centers. The containment depends on legal and semi-legal categories in which people on the move are placed.

Forced Mobilities Within and Between the States of the “Balkan Route”

“The state is doing its job. Due to the increased number and influx of migrants, which is now being felt in the area of Sid, the gendarmerie will be on duty in the coming days on the territory of this municipality to make sure that there are no people on the streets who should not be there, especially that there are no uncontrolled gatherings.”

“No migrant who is not in our system and does not have a proper permit, is allowed and cannot move on our streets, and they are especially not allowed to make camps or stay in an area where it is not regulated and allowed.”

“Now that we have a coronavirus crisis, these people can be a health risk for themselves and our citizens and therefore they have to be in our camps where they are controlled and where they have all possible medical care and protection.”

These statements were made by Aleksandar Vulin, the Minister of Interior of the Republic of Serbia, as a justification for one of the actions of “finding irregular migrants”, when people sleeping in the tents in woods in Šid area were captured and forcibly taken to camps (see Klikaktiv, ERIM & Transbalkan Solidarity 2020). People on the move sleeping outside of the camps were portrayed as a potential ‘danger’ that needs to be ‘restrained’ by the police forces. *Forced relocations* to the official camps (usually in the southern parts of Serbia) became a widespread practice, promoted in media. Irregularized people are being forcibly moved to camps during these actions. This increased policing of people on the move is aligned with the anti-migrant movement which began to act actively in 2020. The newly formed anti-migrant movement in Serbia resemble informal right-wing forces and civil militias existing elsewhere, e.g. in Bulgaria (cf. Apostolova 2016, 41). Both police and anti-migrant forces target people who move freely and

perpetrate violence over them, which they justify by labelling them as ‘irregular’ and potentially dangerous.

While these relocations are interpreted as forced mobilities within the state’s borders, informal expulsions from a state territory along the green borders – a form of ‘push-backs’ – are framed here as forced mobilities between the states. Push-backs refer to situations when

“people are expelled shortly after entering the territory of a country without being granted the possibility to start administrative procedures to stay, to access the mechanisms of international protection, to explain their personal circumstances, or to object to their treatment. Push-backs are expulsions, direct deportations, readmissions, or other forms of immediate involuntary return across one or several territorial borders. Depending on the regulatory framework in place, these forms of forced displacement can be legalised under national law—as in Hungary—or semi-formalised, for example by relying on bilateral agreements or informal practices” (Push-Back Map Collective 2020, 199).

Forced and informal expulsions are documented mostly by the activist organizations supporting people in the border areas along the Balkans (Border Violence Monitoring Network 2020). Push-backs in the Balkans include violent acts perpetrated by police authorities, e.g. smashing people’s mobile phones, taking of money, punching, kicking, beating with batons, and using of electric tasers (Isakjee, Davies, Obradović-Wochnik & Augustová 2020, 1765). Even though the practices of push-backs occur worldwide in different forms, they became an omnipresent, everyday, and physical reality on the border which is in the focus of this paper – the one between Serbia and Croatia.

“The game” is a term coined by people on move, referring to irregularized and unauthorized crossings via green borders, characterized by severe violence (cf. MSF 2017, 4; Augustová 2021, 50). ‘Games’ are often – but not necessarily – navigated by people officially labeled as ‘smugglers’. Discussing the role of ‘smugglers’ is highly challenging, since authorities predominantly treat them as dangerous criminals enabling trafficking, while people on the move perceive them as guides, advisors, and allies (Mandić 2017, 28). When people on the move say that they ‘go to game’, like Hadi, they mean that they are trying to cross the border, despite the risk of being injured and/or returned. Professional smugglers, like the one who took the money from Hadi and his family, are also part of the border regime. Turning to professional smugglers, the use of clandestine routes and risky border crossings are direct consequences of the absence of legal and safe ways to seek asylum or migrate towards the EU countries (MSF 2017; Schindel 2019, 6; Korac 2021, 77). Some people are trying to move across the borders themselves, without the services provided by professional smugglers.

The potentially deadly attempts called ‘the game’ resemble the Russian roulette. Playing ‘the game’ often results in getting caught and being pushed back, but includes a whole range of violent situations that people on the move are ex-

posed to while trying to cross mountains and rivers. It is unknown how many people lost their lives while crossing the Balkan borders (MSF 2017, 11). A lot of these border-related deaths were deaths by 'nature', due to increased exposure to environmental conditions, bodily exhaustion, or other factors, resulting in drowning, dehydration, asphyxia, or hypothermia (Schindel 2019, 4). Nevertheless, as Schindel explains, 'nature' is produced, mobilized and instrumentalized as an active factor in border control.

As we could see from the narratives of Yaser, Gohar, Hadi and Fazal, people accommodated in the asylum centers wait both for the successful 'game' and the positive decision from the asylum office. These two outcomes are not necessarily conflicted. Different types of centers described in the previous subsection are an important aspect of forced mobilities, not only immobilitis. For example, the reception centers near the border with Croatia more often host people who were pushed back by police authorities – i.e. the people whose 'game' was unsuccessful.

'The game' could be interpreted as a form of collective agency, expressed by people on the move. There is a risk that, if framed as a collective agency, the notion of 'game' could be mitigated, or even exoticized, since the use of an ordinary word associated with fun obscures violent realities of border regimes. The practice of 'game' is a clear indicator that securitarian border policies are unable to stop migration, although they may increase the violence experienced by people trying to cross the borders and achieve 'normal lives'. This is why the 'game' can also be understood as a type of forced mobility, produced by the lack of legal alternatives to cross the border and denial of the possibility to apply for asylum at border crossings. The relationship between the 'game' and control of the movement became dialectical – people on the move play 'the game', while being played by defensive EU's external borders. But they are also forced into 'the game' by the current border regimes. As Lipovec Čebren and Zorn (2016) argued, immigration control and the autonomy of migration are intertwined, but the former is a response to the latter – not the other way around.

People on the move, confined in different types of camps or informal shelters, for different periods, are both in the state of "involuntary immobility" (Lubkemann 2008) and "hyper-mobility" (Fontanari 2017), forcibly circulating across spaces within the external border of the EU (Stojić Mitrović & Vilenica 2019). This paradox, characteristic of externalized EU border regime in the Balkans, is articulated as *confinement in movement* (Hameršak & Pleše 2018). Constant back and forth movements across states, camps, squats, border areas, woodlands, cities and smaller towns are a both the expression of collective agency and security-humanitarian migration management. These multidirectional movements along the Balkans are more or less coerced.

Deportations conducted in a completely legal framework are another example of forced movements along the EU's external (and internal) borders. All contemporary forced, involuntary movements back are deportations. It is interesting that people on the move use the term "deported" when they refer to 'push-backs' as informal expulsions. For example, during one of the informal conversations, a per-

son describing his last ‘game’ to me said: “I was deported by Croatian police”. In legislation, deportation is often called ‘forced removal’. People whose asylum application has been refused or rejected or whose right to asylum/subsidiary protection ceased in Serbia, need to leave the country voluntarily within 30 days. If not, s/he will be forcibly removed (Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection 2018, Article 86). Until removal, s/he may be placed in a detention center, discussed in previous subsection. Besides determination that a person’s fear of persecution is unfounded, or that a person was not subjected to serious harm, a reason for rejecting the asylum may be the application of the ‘first country of asylum’ or ‘safe third country’ rules (Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection 2018, article 42). These regulations, harmonized with EU’s asylum legislation, reduce the possibility to get the asylum, since people generally cross several borders. Also, they are the reason why people avoid being fingerprinted in countries of externalized EU border regime – they are aware that the asylum system is built to deter them.

It is not exactly clear what happens in practice with people whose asylum application has been refused in Serbia, but the Asylum Office generally renders more negative than positive decisions (for rates see Belgrade Center for Human Rights 2021). There are some accounts of deportations in Croatia, e.g. a story about a man deported from Croatia to Morocco (Bužinkić 2020). Deportations and voluntary returns of people on the move are still under-researched topics in the Balkans. The lack of research makes addressing coercion in returns difficult. Some of my interlocutors were rejected for asylum because earlier they sought asylum in a ‘safe third country’ before Serbia, but I do not know what happened afterward. Based on the statistics of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) implementing the program of Assisted Voluntary Returns and Reintegration (AVRR), it may be assumed that some of them were ‘voluntarily’ returned to countries of departure. In the dining room of the transit-detention center in Croatia, one may observe IOM posters for AVRR, which are also hung on the walls of reception and asylum centers in Serbia.

The question of voluntary returns becomes momentous with the New Pact on Migration and Asylum proposed by European Commission in 2020. The New Pact declares a “new solidarity mechanism” that will “primarily focus on relocation or return sponsorship” (European Commission 2020, 5). Under return sponsorship, EU Member States will “swiftly return those who have no right to stay” (irregular migrants), with the operational support of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex). Frontex is yet another element of violence perpetrated in the name of security, human rights, and caring (Perkowski 2018; Isakjee, Davies, Obradović-Wochnik & Augustová 2020, 1754). Cooperation with the Western Balkans in optimizing voluntary return was also announced, while status agreements that allow Frontex to assist in border management were already signed with some Western Balkan countries (including Serbia) (European Commission 2020, 21; see also Stojić Mitrović & Vilenica 2019, 5). It was also emphasized that “return is more effective when carried out voluntarily and accompanied with strong reintegration measures” (European Commission 2020, 8). The bottom line is that the EU will put more effort into promoting and enhancing “voluntary returns”.

Although physical force is not employed in assisted voluntary returns, it may be the last chance to avoid deportation or other hardships connected to staying (Sökefeld 2020). From the reading of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, it is clear that the EU has no intention to facilitate migrants' stay. The language of "solidarity" used in the New Pact tends to camouflage the non-acceptance of migrants whose presence has been systematically irregularized. Returns, which are in fact facilitated by many legal barriers, are named "voluntary" to mask the motives behind structural violence of border regimes.

Conclusion

How can we understand the internalization of refugee/migrant logic, narrated by Gohar and Yaser and quoted in the opening section? Was it a situational self-victimization, since getting the asylum – which is the only way to regulate the legal status of people coming from certain countries – depends on the asylum-seekers' capacities to prove the 'well-founded fear of persecution'? Or was it a 'cry for help', the request to acknowledge their suffering, deservingness, and the right to refugee status? Was it a struggle, since people are forced to compete for their right to asylum, even at the cost of calling out the companions for not being 'real refugees'? Or, was it uncritical surrendering to bureaucratic labels? Did our conversation remind them of the interview in the asylum procedure, so they told me what they would tell to an authorized police officer of the Asylum Office? Or was it simply a small talk in a 'camp situation' that helped them to fill in the time of waiting? There is no final answer. The right interpretation is probably somewhere in the middle. But their narratives and the narratives of other people brought up in this article, show that structural constraints of the post-2015 EU border regime deeply affect peoples' lives. The constraints of dominant narratives shape their perceptions and actions.

With this text, I tried to displace the matter of force and coercion outside the initial moment of departure (e.g. departure from Syria, Iran, or Afghanistan) to Europe, and beyond the classifications imposed by refugee protection and border regimes. People on the move face physical and legal barriers, subjecting them to different forms of force, coercion, and violent situations. Being involuntary confined in Balkan countries is a type of coercion. Coercion was understood here as a set of activities by powerful agents, in order to constrain the less powerful agents' possibilities for action – the possibilities to cross the borders towards the EU. The proliferation of official collective centers is a consequence of the efforts to externalize EU's borders and to create a zone of containment. However, the physical spaces of containment – informal settlements, woodlands, asylum, (transit) reception, and (transit) detention centers – may at the same time facilitate and slow down the movement. By comparing three types of official collective centers, I have observed an interesting tendency – the higher the degree of confinement, the more investment into the spaces of containment. People are often placed in these spaces in accordance with bureaucratic labels – unregistered foreigners, asylum seekers, rejected asylum seekers, etc. The 'encampment' appears as the manifestation of

security-humanitarian logic. The narrative about border-crossers as people being *in* danger and *a* danger has been explicitly used as a justification for forced relocations to camps.

The structural violence of legal barriers produces severe difficulties in accessing asylum in Serbia and prevents people to move forward. As a response, people find ways to navigate through the ‘cracks’ of the system and express individual or collective agency. While being confined, they express individual agency through trying to make their lives bearable – e.g. to become volunteer interpreters. The practice of ‘game’ is somewhere between an expression of collective agency and a type of forced mobility.

Forced mobilities between and within Serbia and Croatia include relocations to camps and detention centers, lawful and unlawful expulsions from the states. The very practice of ‘push-backs’ indicates that physical force and violence are employed to secure the borders – to ‘push’ people from the external borders of the EU. However, the argument about forced (im)movements *en route* to Europe encompasses both physical and non-physical violence. The so-called voluntary returns officially cannot be classified as forced movement, but it shows that the current asylum, border, and immigration policies find ways to hinder the movement within the framework of liberal-democratic governance.

The intention behind my argument about forced (im)mobilities during the journeys was not to present people on the move merely as suffering and vulnerable individuals in need of protection but to point out hidden patterns that further reproduce the cycle of violence connected to migration, borders, and displacement at the periphery of the EU. The violence is hidden, covered-up, or justified, but also perpetrated in the name of law, security, and protection. Physical, structural, and cultural violence in migrants’ journeys alternate with each other. People moving around the Balkans are going through processes of regularization and irregularization while trying to improvise lives in violent and changing circumstances. Metaphorically speaking, they are *playing the game* while being *played*.

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Примљено / Received: 23. 02. 2021.

Прихваћено / Accepted: 31. 08. 2021.