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## European Irregularized Migration Regime: Keywords from Peripheries – Introduction\*

In this special issue, the European irregularized migration regime will be examined through an ethnographic perspective, based on studies carried out in its peripheries. Rather than treating this regime as a coherent or centralized system, the contributions trace how it is assembled through everyday practices, material environments, spatial conditions, temporalities, but also through modes of control, care and negotiation. The papers collected in this issue focus on cases drawn from Turkey, Italy, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina to illustrate the way bordering and irregularization of migration occur at the margins of Europe. A set of interrelated keywords – (im)mobility, material traces, child labour, visa, solidarity networks, and (re-)fugitive democracy – structure the thematic analysis of the European irregularized migration regime as a field of practices, relations and ways of life.

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*Keywords:* keywords, migration, irregularization, periphery, Balkan route

## Европски режим ирегуларизованих миграција: појмови са периферија – Увод

У овом темату, европски режим ирегуларизованих миграција посматра се кроз етнографску перспективу, засновану на студијама спроведеним на његовим периферијама. Уместо да се овај режим третира као кохерентан или централизован систем, радови прате како се он обликује кроз свакодневне праксе, материјална окружења, просторне услове, темпоралности, али и кроз начине контроле, бриге и преговарања. Радови сабрани у овом темату фокусирају се на случајеве из Турске, Италије, Србије и Босне и Херцеговине како би се показало на који начин се граничење (*bordering*) и ирегуларизација (*irregularization*) миграција одвијају на маргинама Европе. Скуп међусобно повезаних кључних појмова – (не)мобилност, материјални трагови, дечји рад, виза, мреже солидарности и избегличка демократија – структурира тематску анализу европског режима ирегуларизованих миграција као поља пракси, односа и начина живота.

*Кључне речи:* појмови, миграције, ирегуларизација, периферија, Балканска рута

This special issue brings together a set of ethnographically grounded contributions that engage with what is often referred to as the European irregularized migration regime. Rather than approaching this regime as a fixed structure, the articles trace how it is lived, negotiated, recorded and made meaningful in specific contexts across different European peripheries.

It is important to clarify the use of the term “irregularized migration (regime)”. Its adoption reflects a critical departure from notions such as “illegal” or “irregular” migration. Migration as such is neither inherently illegal nor irregular; rather, it becomes constituted as such through a range of practices and processes of (il)legalization and (ir)regularization. By using the past participle *irregularized*, instead of the adjective *irregular*, we seek to emphasize this shift away from normative and taken-for-granted categorizations, and to foreground a constructivist perspective in which migration regimes actively produce the very categories they claim to describe (Hameršak, Škokić & Pleše 2026, 2).

The relevance of this perspective becomes particularly visible in the context of Southeast Europe. In 2015, during what media and politicians labeled as the “refugee” or “migration crisis”, more than a million people passed through Serbia and neighboring countries on their way to EU member states, most of them coming from West Asia and North Africa, often without passports or visas. In the years that followed, EU member states, with the support of non-EU countries, intensified securitization policies aimed at containing and restricting movement. In this context, Serbia and neighboring states have come to function as Europe’s borderlands, actively participating in the externalization and enforcement of EU border control. These developments have been central to the ongoing processes of irregularization, through which certain forms of mobility are rendered “illegal” or “illegitimate”. The so-called Balkan route has, in turn, attracted significant scholarly attention, reflecting a broader interest in understanding the European migration regime from its peripheries. The contributions gathered here speak to this growing body of research, approaching the regime from the sites where its effects are most intensely experienced and negotiated.

This special issue originated in discussions surrounding the conference “Keywording the European Irregularized Migration Regime: Reflections from/on the Peripheries”, held in Zagreb in April 2024.<sup>1</sup> While not all contributions included here were presented at the conference, they engage with a shared set of questions that emerged from it. This special issue follows an earlier special issue that drew more directly on papers presented at the same conference, published in journal *Narodna umjetnost* Vol. 62, No. 2 (Hameršak & Piškorić 2025).

The practice of “keywording” is consistent with other literature where concepts have been taken up as objects of critical inquiry, primarily within the realm of several keyword collections in the fields of cultural studies (e.g. Williams 1983) and critical migration studies (e.g. Casas-Cortés et al. 2015; De Genova & Tazzioli 2016; De Genova & Tazzioli 2022; Hameršak, Škokić & Pleše 2026). Similar efforts to systematize key concepts can also be found in ethnology and anthropology (e.g. Gavrilović 2017). Instead of

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<sup>1</sup> The conference marked the concluding event of the project *The European Irregularized Migration Regime at the Periphery of the EU: from Ethnography to Keywords* (ERIM). The project was funded by the Croatian Science Foundation and coordinated by the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research (Zagreb), with two researchers from the Institute of Ethnography SASA participating as project team members. The conference brought together researchers working on diverse peripheral contexts, both within and beyond EU, creating a space for exchange that extended beyond the project itself.

following the conventions of the keyword volumes, the articles within this special issue pursue a less explicit form of keywording. Here, keywords emerge from ethnographic encounters and are shaped by the specific contexts in which migration regimes are lived and contested.

Each contribution foregrounds a specific keyword, and taken together, they form a set of interrelated concepts: (im)mobility, material traces, child labour, visa, solidarity networks, and (re-)fugitive democracy. First, (im) mobility emerges as central to the dynamics of the Balkan route. While the above dynamics, related to the externalization of the EU border regime in Bosnia and Herzegovina, has been examined and debated in the academic literature, this article directs our attention toward an internal spatialization of border regimes, unpacking how mobility is rerouted, constrained, and rearranged within the Una-Sana Canton itself.

From this starting point, the articles trace how processes of irregularization take shape across different contexts. They become tangible through material traces of movement through urban margins and forested landscapes, which border crosses leave behind and locals often treat as “waste”, as shown in the analysis of Trieste borderlands. They are inscribed in forms of labor, where children on the move are drawn into conditions of informality, exploitation, and institutional invisibility. They also take shape through temporalities of waiting, delay, and bureaucratic procedure. An autoethnographic account of visa regime approaches this temporality from the researcher’s position, offering a different vantage point on how administrative timelines and obligations shape movement, access, and the very practice of ethnographic fieldwork.

The other side of these processes involves practices of care and solidarity, through which alternative forms of living together emerge within precarious urban borderlands, as illustrated by an analysis of a grassroots initiative in Istanbul. The same contribution shows how migrants actively negotiate hostile environments, participating in and shaping these initiatives as spaces of belonging, even in the absence of formal citizenship. Finally, from a theoretical and historical perspective, the issue engages (re-)fugitive democracy as a keyword for thinking about mobility, escape, and the creation of spaces of refuge. By introducing this concept, the concluding article draws attention to less visible and often overlooked dimensions of democratic politics.

The contributions bring forward a multiplicity of voices, highlighting the diverse actors and perspectives involved in the European irregularized migration regime. The contributions deal with different EU peripheries, namely Turkey, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Italy, providing an

account of processes of irregularization and bordering on the ground. The concluding article expands this analytical frame by engaging a historical case from the United States, situating the discussion within a broader theoretical perspective. Together, these contributions offer a glimpse into a largely unseen world that emerges through ethnographic engagement with the European irregularized migration regime.

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