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Practices of Control and the Production of (Im)Mobility in Una-Sana Canton (Bosnia and Herzegovina)*

This paper examines how practices regulating and producing (im)mobility took shape in the Una-Sana Canton (Bosnia and Herzegovina) over the course of 2019 and 2020, where urban dynamics structured movement and produced uneven and precarious experiences for people on the move. Drawing on Critical Migration Studies and Border Studies, which conceptualize mobility as both a technology of governance and a site of contestation, the article engages with debates on how border regimes are unevenly embedded within local environments, infrastructures and everyday urban life.

While existing literature has extensively documented EU border enforcement, pushbacks and the management of mobility at the external borders, less attention has been paid to the internal spatialization of border regimes and to how local authorities and communities actively shape zones of containment and invisibility within a country.

Based on more than seven years of long-term engagement in the region, complemented by interviews conducted during my doctoral research within the ERC project “TheGAME. Counter Mapping Informal Refugee Mobilities along

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the Balkan Route”, the article traces how cantonal decisions to restrict mobility, and the public protests that accompanied them, contributed to the formation of an internal border zone within Bosnia and Herzegovina. The article shows how internal borders are assembled through practices that simultaneously enable, redirect, and obstruct movement.

Keywords: Velečevo, Bosanska Otoka, forced (im)mobility, Vučjak, internal borders, “no man’s land”

Праксе контроле и производња (не)мобилности у Унско-Санском кантону (Босна и Херцеговина)

Овај рад истражује како су се праксе које регулишу и производе (не)мобилност обликовале у Унско-Санском кантону (Босна и Херцеговина) током 2019. и 2020. године, где су урбане динамике структурирале кретање и производиле неуједначена и прекарна искуства за људе у покрету. Ослањајући се на критичке студије миграција и граница, које мобилност концептуализују истовремено као технологију управљања и као поље оспоравања, рад се укључује у расправе о томе како су гранични режими неуједначено уграђени у локалне средине, инфраструктуре и свакодневни урбани живот.

Док је постојећа литература у великој мери документовала спровођење контроле граница ЕУ, насилна враћања (*pushbacks*) и управљање мобилношћу на спољним границама, мање пажње је посвећено унутрашњој просторизацији граничних режима, као и начинима на које локалне власти и заједнице активно обликују зоне задржавања и невидљивости унутар државе.

На основу више од седам година дугорочног ангажмана у региону, допуњеног интервјуима спроведеним током мог докторског истраживања у оквиру ЕРЦ пројекта *TheGAME. Counter Mapping Informal Refugee Mobilities along the Balkan Route*, чланак прати како су одлуке кантоналних власти да ограниче кретање, као и јавни протести који су их пратили, допринели формирању унутрашње граничне зоне унутар Босне и Херцеговине. Чланак показује како се унутрашње границе успостављају кроз праксе које истовремено омогућавају, преусмеравају и ометају кретање.

Кључне речи: Велечево, Босанска Отока, присилна (не)мобилност, Вучјак, унутрашње границе, „ничија земља”

INTRODUCTION

During the war, I was 4 years old. I remember everything. I was hit by a grenade, and I still have marks on my leg. I remember the humanitarian organization helping us, how they were so rude, and I believe that other people, locals, have the same feeling. And how can you be rude yourself with migrants after our war? These migrants are almost in the same situation, but locals say: "They don't have war." So what? Don't they have the right to search for a better life? (Lidija, Bihać 2023)

By late 2017, Bosnia-Herzegovina had become a key transit zone along the so-called "Balkan Route" (Bez nec, Speer & Stojić Mitrović 2016; Hameršak et al. 2020; Hess & Kasperek 2022; Minca & Weima 2026), as migratory trajectories progressively shifted towards the country, turning it into a new transit hub (Stojić Mitrović et al. 2020, 58; Kurnik & Razsa 2020, 13–14) and simultaneously solidifying a constrained geography of waiting.

In March 2018, Bihać emerged as a central node on the Balkan route due to its proximity to the European Union border (Leutloff-Grandits 2023; Minca & Umek 2020). The city is located in the Una-Sana Canton and is part of the Krajina region, which has a population of around 300,000, with approximately 45,000 residents in Bihać itself, making it the sixth-largest city in the country (Hromadžić 2019). This relatively small region experienced a significant increase in the presence of people on the move, with 3,400–3,900 migrants present in Una-Sana Canton by mid-2018 (UNHCR, 2018) while, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Bosnian Ministry of Security recorded the entry of "24,067 migrants and refugees" into Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2018. Alongside the arrival of people on the move, the canton also saw a rapid expansion of humanitarian actors, including UN agencies such as IOM and UNHCR, as well as numerous international and local NGOs. This resulted in a parallel influx of humanitarian workers, further reshaping the demographic and social composition of the area.

Before proceeding with the main discussion, I clarify my use of terminology. I adopt the term "people on the move", which circulates across academic, institutional, and activist contexts, to emphasize the heterogeneity of those travelling along the Balkan Route and avoid rigid legal or administrative labels. However, I also use the term "migrants" when reflecting interlocutors' language or specific contexts, with attention to its potential stigmatizing connotations. I thus employ terminology in a situated and reflexive way, acknowledging the social and political processes through which mobility is governed and represented.

During the period under study, the Una-Sana Canton, and the city of Bihać in particular, became a primary site where migratory trajectories were channeled, slowed down and repeatedly redirected. Between 2018 and 2020, the canton was not only a space of transit but increasingly a site of forced interruption, where mobility was governed through a series of localized interventions. Buses and trains were stopped at cantonal boundaries, and people on the move were displaced to peripheral camps or remote areas. At the same time, repeated and violent pushbacks by Croatian authorities continually forced migrants back into Bosnia-Herzegovina (BVMN 2020; Augustová 2023b; Helms 2025), producing cycles of movement and return that intensified the pressure on local infrastructures and urban space. These processes reshaped the rhythms of the city and the trajectories of those passing through it, creating a landscape in which mobility and immobility intertwined in complex and often violent ways.

As Hromadžić (2025) suggests through the concept of “patchy internalization”, transnational migration and violent border regimes are unevenly incorporated into local environments. In Bihać, many people on the move remained in a “state of limbo” (Stojić Mitrović 2018, 22), caught in cycles of movement and return that reflect the broader dynamics of border enforcement in the region (Hromadžić 2025). As migrants attempted to continue their journey, they encountered conditions marked by uncertainty, restricted mobility and frequent obstacles. Hence, rather than simply being immobilized, people on the move are subjected to continuous re-routing and imposed circulation across roads, camps and peripheral areas, generating what Tazzioli (2020) defines as “a condition of forced and convoluted hypermobility” (Tazzioli 2020, 13) and contributing to fragmented and circular migration trajectories. These concepts provide a lens for understanding how mobility is governed and experienced locally. “Patchy internalization” highlights the uneven embedding of border regimes across urban and peripheral spaces, while “convoluted hypermobility” captures the lived experience of constant movement under constraint. Together, they show how mobility in Una-Sana Canton has not been merely restricted or enabled, but actively reconfigured through localized practices that fragment, redirect and exhaust movement. Within this framework, Lidija’s reflections can also be read as an observation of how these dynamics materialize in everyday life, shaping perceptions of who is allowed to move, how and under what conditions. They also highlight how the arrival of people on the move has reconfigured the spatial and temporal organization of everyday life in Bihać. Rather than being experienced as a purely infrastructural process, mobility is interpreted through

memories of past displacement, violence and humanitarian intervention, shaping local perceptions and practices. Mobility is thus understood and experienced in different ways, reshaping everyday urban rhythms and revealing how movement is tolerated, questioned or constrained.

In Una-Sana Canton, the growing number of migrants has overwhelmed local infrastructure and exposed the unpreparedness of both municipal and national institutions (Šantić, Oruc & DEgiorgi 2022). Here, migrants wait for the right moment to make another attempt, while others are pushed back by Croatian authorities, deepening the sense of containment and uncertainty in the canton (Bužinkić & Avon 2020; Augustová, Farrand-Carrapico & Obradovic-Wochnik 2023; Davies, Isakjee & Obradovic-Wochnik 2023).

In the early stages of this process, support for people on the move was largely provided through localized, community-based solidarity initiatives (Kurnik & Razsa 2020; Gentili, Minca & Weima 2026). However, as the route became progressively institutionalized, attitudes and governance strategies shifted. The EU began channeling funds directly to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which gradually took over operational control in the country, directing people into newly established EU-funded Temporary Reception Centers (see Ahmetašević et al. 2023; Stojić Mitrović et al. 2020). This institutionalization coincided with an expansion of humanitarian governance, as international agencies and NGOs became a key presence in the canton. At the same time, exclusionary dynamics were reinforced by the emergence of mobilization of locally organized anti-migrant groups within Una-Sana Canton. These groups actively promoted practices of exclusion, stigmatization and criminalization towards migrants and those supporting them, contributing to the production of a hostile environment (BVMN 2020; Helms 2023). Local authorities also restricted the provision of aid by residents, introduced internal administrative borders within Una-Sana Canton and prohibited movement into certain urban areas (Stojić Mitrović et al. 2020).

The Una-Sana Canton is a space where migratory movement was visible, everyday and deeply intertwined with urban life, until it was progressively removed from public view through policies of containment and repression. This process has rendered the presence of people on the move increasingly marginalized and hidden, reducing their visibility in built-up areas and pushing them into more peripheral and difficult-to-access locations. This article aims to analyze mobility in Una-Sana Canton between 2019 and 2020, during the first phase of the canton's transformation into a territory where movement was not only monitored but systematical-

ly restricted. The paper presents three main episodes that illustrate the mechanisms through which mobility was obstructed: transport restrictions that left people on the move stranded in rural peripheries; collective expulsions from urban areas; and measures that confined people to remote locations, pushing them into more precarious forms of invisibility.

As Helms (2025) notes, repeated pushbacks created a situation of *bottlenecking*, leaving people stuck in Bosnia-Herzegovina while seeking to reach EU states via the Balkan Route, and forcing them to attempt the informal border-crossing “Game” – the term used by people on the move to describe repeated attempts to cross the border and enter the EU (Minca & Collins 2021; Augustova 2023a; Mucko, Pleše & Škokić 2022) – repeatedly. In this context, people on the move were not only brutally beaten and pushed back into Bosnia-Herzegovina by Croatian border authorities, but also subjected to pushbacks within the canton itself. The case of Una-Sana shows how borders were enacted within everyday spaces across the canton.

After outlining the relevant literature and the gap to which this article speaks, and discussing positionality and methodological questions, the empirical part of the article is organized around three sites that illustrate distinct but interconnected mechanisms of mobility governance. First, the section examines Velečevo, where buses travelling towards Bihać were routinely stopped by police authorities and migrants were forcibly ordered to disembark. This practice effectively created a *micro-border* within the canton, redirecting people into cycles of walking, waiting and repeated interception, and operating as an internal checkpoint, here conceptualized as a site where mobility was interrupted and territorially recalibrated.

Second, the section turns to the creation of the Vučjak camp, established in a remote, contaminated area just a few kilometers from the Croatian border. Conceived as a tool of containment, Vučjak functioned less as a humanitarian site than as a mechanism for isolating people and pushing them away from urban visibility and closer to the EU border. Its material conditions, geography and political management illustrate how state and cantonal authorities produced containment through deliberate marginalization.

Third, the section analyzes Bosanska Otoka, where police checks on trains reproduced dynamics similar to those observed in Velečevo, and where a “no-man’s land” emerged as an improvised holding space in which people were left to wait, disperse or attempt to continue their journey on foot.

LITERATURE REVIEW: CONCEPTUALIZING BORDERS, MOBILITY AND CONTROL

Scholarship on Critical Migration Studies and Border Studies has extensively examined the externalization and multiplication of EU borders, focusing on practices such as pushbacks, deterrence, and the management of mobility at and beyond the territorial edges of the European Union (Hess & Kasperek 2017; Augustová 2023a, 2023b; Isakjee, Davies, Obradović-Wochnik & Augustová 2020; Karamandidou & Kasperek 2022; Tazzioli 2019, Mezzadra & Neilson 2013). This body of work has demonstrated how borders operate not as fixed territorial lines but as dispersed and processual *dispositifs*, enacted through legal frameworks, policing practices, and infrastructural arrangements that regulate movement across multiple sites. Within Critical Migration Studies, mobility itself has been reconceptualized as a central terrain of governance, where control is exercised through strategies of redirection, delay, fragmentation and forced circulation rather than simple immobilization (Tazzioli 2020, 2019; Garelli & Tazzioli 2022; Walters 2015).

Building on this perspective, a growing body of literature has examined how migration governance unfolds along the Balkan Route, identifying the region as a key space of transit, containment and repeated displacement (Beznec, Speer & Stojić Mitrović 2016; Hameršak et al. 2020; Minca & Umek 2020; Augustová 2023a). These studies have highlighted how EU border regimes are effectively extended into non-EU territories such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, where pushbacks, informal camps and humanitarian infrastructures contribute to fragmented and cyclical migration trajectories (Stojić Mitrović et al. 2020; Kurnik & Razsa 2020; Jordan & Minca 2023; Gentili, Minca & Weima 2026). At the same time, scholars have emphasized the uneven and localized nature of these processes, showing how migration governance is mediated by specific political, social and spatial contexts (Hromadžić 2025).

In this regard, the concept of “patchy internalization”, as developed by Hromadžić (2025), provides a useful lens for understanding how transnational border regimes are selectively embedded within local environments, producing differentiated geographies of control, visibility and exclusion. Similarly, Walters (2015) conceptualizes “viapolitics” as a way of capturing how mobility itself becomes a site and instrument of governance, drawing attention to the infrastructural dimensions of mobility control, whereby vehicles, routes, and transit spaces become key sites through which movement is regulated, interrupted, and contested (Garelli

& Tazzioli 2016; Walters, Heller & Pezzani 2022). These approaches collectively shift the analytical focus from borders as fixed locations to borders as effects of situated practices unfolding across space.

However, despite these important contributions, some aspects remain underexplored. First, while the externalization of EU borders and the dynamics of transit along the Balkan Route have been widely documented, less attention has been paid to the internal spatialization of border regimes within specific contexts and to how internal borders are produced within the territory of states formally positioned as transit zones. Second, existing research has tended to privilege macro-analyses, often overlooking how local authorities, municipal decisions and everyday practices actively participate in shaping regimes of (im)mobility on the ground. Third, the interplay between different modalities of control within a single territorial setting remains underexplored, particularly in relation to how these mechanisms are experienced and negotiated in everyday urban and peri-urban environments.

By focusing on Una-Sana Canton, this article addresses these gaps by providing an empirically grounded analysis of how internal borders are assembled through the interaction of administrative measures, infrastructural interventions and social contestation. It shows how mobility governance operates through a dispersed regime that simultaneously redirects, obstructs and confines movement, contributing to the production of what I conceptualize as a locally internalized regime of (im)mobility. In doing so, the article advances existing debates by foregrounding the role of local actors and localized practices in the making of internal borders, and by demonstrating how these processes reshape the spatial and temporal organization of mobility within a transit territory.

POSITIONALITY AND METHODOLOGICAL REMARKS

It was in January 2019, during a snow-covered morning in Bihać, that I first stepped into the field that would shape the next several years of my life. "At the time, I did not arrive as a researcher but to begin an assignment in civil service with IPSIA, an Italian NGO active in the region since 1997". Initially dedicated to post-war reconstruction and tourism development, IPSIA had shifted its focus in 2017 towards supporting people on the move along the Balkan migration route, first in Serbia and, from 2018 onwards, in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Its activities ranged from supporting the local Red Cross during the early, makeshift phase of the Borići camp to operating later within formal camps such as Bira, Borići, Sedra (which has since been closed) and later Lipa (currently the only camp still operating

in Una-Sana Canton), through the distribution of tea, the management of collective kitchens and the organization of recreational activities. I became involved in this framework by taking part in IPSIA's work supporting people on the move in the region.

From 2019 to 2020, I worked across nearly all the camps in Una-Sana Canton, such as Borići, Sedra, Bira and Lipa, as well as makeshift camps. The more time I spent there, the more I realized that what I was witnessing was a political landscape structured by the control of movement: a system in which movement itself functioned as a tool of control (Hess & Kasperek 2017; Tazzioli 2019). The closures of camps in urban spaces, the eviction of makeshift camps and abandoned houses in the canton (Gentili, Minca & Weima 2026), the internal violence exercised by local authorities (BVMN 2021) and the repeated pushbacks carried out by Croatian authorities along the border (Augustová 2023b) together determined a complex interplay of mobility and immobility.

In 2020, my involvement in the region shifted. While I continued to work with IPSIA in humanitarian spaces, this time as a volunteer, I became increasingly engaged in activist networks and eventually joined the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN). Between 2020 and 2023, I collected testimonies of pushbacks and police violence along the border and documented patterns of internal violence in Bihać and Velika Kladuša (BVMN 2021). By November 2022, after nearly four years of continuous presence in the field, I became a doctoral researcher within the ERC project "TheGAME. Counter Mapping Informal Refugee Mobilities along the Balkan Route".¹ Yet the research did not begin then; it emerged out of earlier relationships, routines and situated forms of knowledge developed through sustained presence in the field before I identified myself as a researcher. Rather than entering a new field, I found myself studying one I had already come to know through inhabiting it. Nevertheless, this prior engagement did not position me as a local actor; I remained an international researcher whose presence was shaped by institutional affiliation, mobility privileges, and uneven access to the field. This dual positioning, both familiar and external, shaped my access to participants and the forms of knowledge that could be produced. Long-term relationships facilitated access across different spheres (humanitarian organizations, activist networks and local communities), while also requiring careful negotiation of expectations, trust and roles in the research encounter.

¹ See ERC Advanced Grant **TheGAME** (<https://site.unibo.it/thegame/en>)

During the period I lived in Bihać from 2019 to 2023, and later during my fieldwork in 2023 and 2024, I witnessed the transformations that shaped the presence, (in)visibility and (im)mobility of people on the move, as well as the responses of local authorities and community. I developed relationships with locals, humanitarian workers and volunteers, as well as friendships beyond the immediate migration field. These connections were not exploited instrumentally to gain access for research; rather, they became the relational foundation that allowed me to engage with the field carefully and responsibly. These relational infrastructures enabled access to a wide range of actors, including NGOs and local communities, which would otherwise have been difficult to reach. In particular, my previous employment within a humanitarian organization facilitated entry into NGO spaces, where professional and personal connections supported the organization of interviews and participant observation. My positionality was not fixed but co-constructed through interactions with different actors. At times, I was perceived as a volunteer or humanitarian worker, while in other interactions I was positioned more clearly as an external researcher. This dual role blurred boundaries between activism, care and research (Grubiša 2020). These shifts shaped both access and the knowledge produced. Access to institutional actors, such as the police, was limited and mediated by contingent encounters rather than formal agreements.

Additionally, living in Bihać, witnessing key events and gradually building trust made it possible for me to begin to understand the everyday realities of mobility in the region. However, this proximity also required continuous reflexivity. The field was structured by unequal power relations between international actors and local communities, as well as between researchers and people on the move, and my position was implicated in these hierarchies. My institutional affiliation and my freedom of movement stood in stark contrast to the constrained mobility of people on the move, shaping the conditions under which knowledge was produced. As Weima and Brankamp (2022) observe, such uneven power relations produce an “unsolved and often undiscussed tension” between the privilege of academic researchers and the “racialised otherness” of their encamped subjects, underscoring the stark contrast between the frequent mobility of scholars and the routine immobilization of those they study (Weima and Brankamp 2022, 341).

Building on these reflections, the following section situates my experience within the broader transformations that shaped mobility in Una-Sana Canton. When I first arrived there, I encountered a landscape where mobility had already begun to harden into an apparatus of containment.

Migrants' movement within the country became increasingly fragmented, constantly interrupted, redirected or immobilized. As De Genova (2019) notes, the border creates a scene of exclusion, where migrants considered "unwanted" must be "stopped" and "turned away". At the same time, the border reinforces the idea that "this exclusion is natural and necessary", with control practices supporting this message. Mobility here was not only obstructed at the EU external border; it was continually controlled by local governance structures.

It is important to note that, while the ethnographic narratives in this paper draw on my experiences prior to the start of my doctoral research, the interviews presented were collected during the course of my doctoral project, which began in November 2022 and was funded by the ERC project. During this time, I conducted seven additional months of fieldwork between 2023 and 2024 in Una-Sana Canton, in Republika Srpska and along the Croatian border. Alongside participant observation, my fieldwork included forty-two interviews with locals, local activists, NGOs workers and people on the move in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Regarding ethical considerations, written informed consent was obtained from NGOs workers, institutional representatives, local residents and volunteers. In cases where participants preferred not to be identified, verbal consent was obtained and pseudonyms are used throughout. While some participants opted to remain anonymous, others chose to have their names and affiliations included. The majority of interviews were conducted in English. Some were conducted in Bosnian with the support of a mediator, while in a few cases I conducted the interviews myself; these were recorded and subsequently transcribed and translated into English by the mediator. Together, these interviews allowed me to access collective memories and past events, complementing and deepening my firsthand observations.

CONTROLLING MOVEMENT AT VELEČEVO: THE ENTRANCE TO UNA-SANA CANTON

It was the first weekend of March 2019, during the Bosnian Independence Day holiday, when my colleague and friend Marine and I decided to take a brief trip to Sarajevo, a short escape before returning to our work in Una-Sana Canton. Neither of us had visited the capital before, and we were quietly seeking to understand the country beyond the humanitarian perimeter that framed our daily routines.

On our way back, on the bus from Sarajevo to Bihać, spatial arrangements silently mapped social hierarchies. At the back sat a group of young men on the move, traveling toward Bihać and a further attempt at the

“Game”. The middle and front rows were occupied by local passengers. After several hours of travel, in Velečevo, near the administrative line dividing the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina from Republika Srpska, the vehicle slowed and two police officers boarded, conducting racial profiling by requesting documents only from those whose bodies marked them as migrants. Their inspection was brief but selective: – “Passport?” – “No.” – “Out.”

Five young men were ordered to step off the bus. They obeyed silently, disappearing into the roadside fields. Across the road, other people (whom I would later meet during a visit to Ključ the following year) were gathered at a Red Cross site, where they had organized themselves to support those on the move whose mobility was being illegally blocked by authorities. A few others were tending to a small fire to keep warm. Inside the bus, the silence was deafening. The driver restarted the engine, and we continued toward Bihać.

In October 2018, the government of Una-Sana Canton implemented measures to restrict freedom of movement by establishing a de facto checkpoint at Velečevo, in the municipality of Ključ, at the canton’s entrance. While not formally designated as such, I conceptualize this site as an *internal checkpoint*: a fixed control point located along an administrative boundary within state territory, through which authorities selectively monitored, filtered and interrupted mobility. At this checkpoint, the police stopped buses to search for people on the move, who were then ordered to leave the vehicle and continue on foot, without any assistance. In this sense, the checkpoint did not function as a fixed border crossing in a legal sense, but as a flexible *dispositif* of control that effectively produced a boundary within the national territory. As highlighted by Stojić Mitrović et al. (2020), over the following 13 months, around 7,000 people were affected by these measures and forced to make their way further north on foot. As argued by Ahmetašević et al. (2023), local authorities, supported and advised by the IOM, effectively created what can be understood as an internal border crossing in central Bosnia-Herzegovina, serving as the entry point into Una-Sana Canton. The notion of the internal checkpoint helps to capture how bordering practices can be displaced inwards, materializing not only at the edges of the state but along key infrastructural routes, where mobility can be intermittently halted, redirected and stratified. For a long time, the only assistance for those stopped came from local Red Cross volunteers, who relied on donations as well as support from local solidarity networks and international volunteers (Stojić Mitrović et al. 2020).

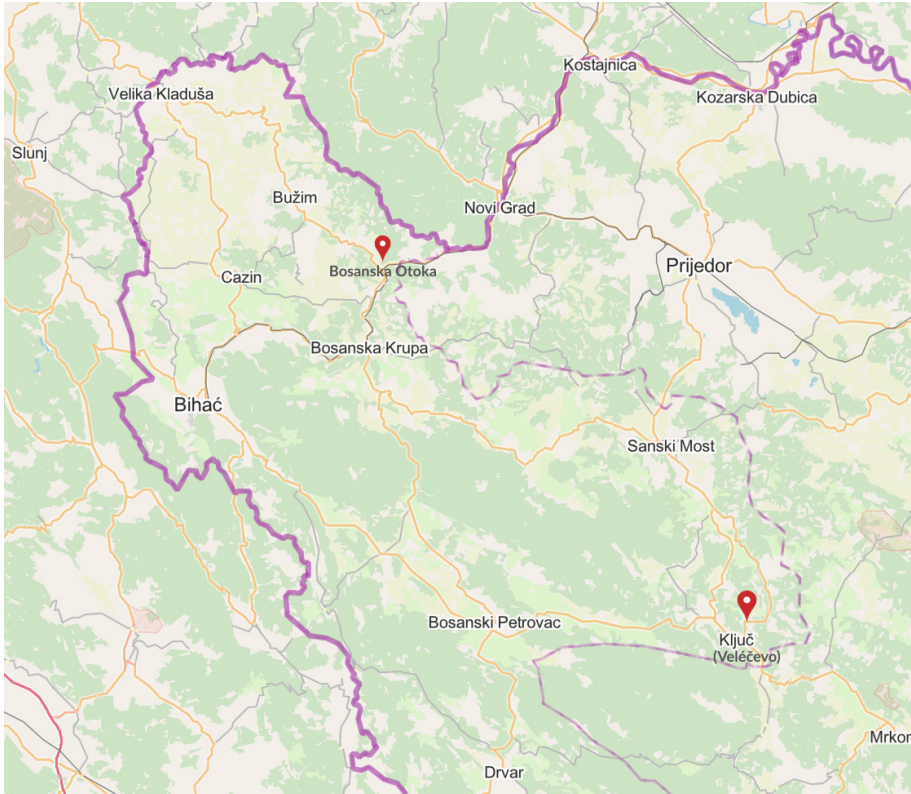


Image 1: Internal boundaries in Una-Sana Canton (Bosnia and Herzegovina), with Bosanska Otoka and Ključ (Velečevo) indicated as key locations where mobility was constrained. Source: ArcGIS Online, based on OpenStreetMap data.

In an interview, Silvia, the director of IPSIA BiH, described how such measures were enacted at the cantonal boundary.

The problem began with directives banning transit, transport and entry into Una-Sana Canton for people on the move. Checkpoints were reinforced, for example at Velečevo and in the “no-man’s land” between Bosanska Otoka and Novigrad [as discussed later], along the boundary between the Federation and *Republika Srpska*. Yet the situation quickly became paradoxical. People continued to find ways to reach the canton border. At night, little by little, they would leave these points – Velečevo and Bosanska Otoka – move on and simply disappear. (Silvia, IPSIA BiH. Bihać, November 2023)

Building on Walters' notion of viapolitics (Walters 2015; Walters, Heller & Pezzani 2022), the bus was not merely a vehicle but a mobile border, a microcosm of state power in motion. Rather than being a neutral means of transportation, the bus itself became a key site through which mobility was governed, filtered and differentially interrupted. Belonging was spatially encoded in seating arrangements and physical appearance, and the right to continue one's journey depended on the possession of documents. In this sense, control did not occur only at fixed border sites, but was enacted through the vehicle, as it moved, stopped and was made to halt at Velečevo. The checkpoint did not simply mark a boundary; it activated the bus as an instrument of selection, whereby some passengers were allowed to remain in circulation while others were forcibly extracted from it. Migrants were not immobilized outright but, as Tazzioli (2018; 2019) would argue, were subjected to enforced circulation within confined spaces, experiencing containment through mobility. The removal of the five men on the move from the bus illustrates these dynamics: rather than being allowed to continue their journey normally, the group was expelled from one mode of transport and compelled to continue on foot, thereby remaining in motion but under conditions of heightened precarity. The young men were reinserted into a cycle of displacement and waiting, forced to navigate an imposed detour that transformed their journey into a fragmented and uncertain trajectory. This forced rerouting can be understood as a form of "immobilization through circulation", where movement itself becomes the means through which control is exercised.

Anela, a local activist supporting people on the move in Una-Sana Canton, offered a concrete illustration of this process, showing how mobility itself was governed through enforced rerouting.

[...] These are the borders of the Una-Sana canton. Illegal [check]points were simply made there where they stopped people. The regular bus from Sarajevo stopped in the village of Velečevo, where they took the migrants off the bus. It was an attempt to prevent the entry of migrants into the Una-Sana Canton, to reduce that number. However, of course, it was unsuccessful, because they [had] travelled a thousand kilometers each from Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan. [...] what does it mean to them to go another 100 kilometers to Bihać? So yes, they continued to move, but it was very sad to watch. People paid for a Sarajevo-Bihać bus ticket but were actually driven to Velečevo, where they were thrown off the bus. The police simply did not allow them to go further. That was horrible, really horrible. (Anela, local activist. Bihać, May 2023)

State power manifests not only through formal regulation but also through orchestrated moments of disruption that shape the very experience of movement. The selective removal of migrants from buses illustrates how governance operates through spatialized strategies (Tazzioli 2020; Garelli & Tazzioli 2016), whereby particular locations become sites of concentrated control. These strategies produce a kind of managed precarity (Tazzioli & Garelli 2020; Walters, Heller & Pezzani 2022; Hameršak & Pleše 2018), in which migrants are technically allowed to continue their journey, yet interventions fragment their mobility, force detours and impose additional labor, uncertainty and risk. As Tazzioli (2021, 7) argues, mobility can function as a technology of government when it is deployed indirectly – by pushing migrants to move away, rerouting their journeys and keeping them in motion – thereby managing and disrupting their lives. This produces convulsive and frantic movements interspersed with prolonged moments of strandedness (Tazzioli 2020, 5). Vehicles and infrastructures become fields of contestation: the bus, normally an instrument of circulation, is transformed by the authorities into an infrastructural obstacle (Walters 2015; Walters, Heller & Pezzani 2022; Garelli & Tazzioli 2022).

The enforced 100 km walk from Velečevo to the city of Bihać generates *erratic geographies* (Tazzioli 2020, 8). Migrants are subjected to *forced mobility* (Garelli & Tazzioli 2016) in ways that are neither autonomous nor efficient, exhausting their resources and prolonging the journey. This blockage occurs not at an external border with Croatia but along an internal administrative boundary between Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In sum, this intervention imposes coerced internal (im)mobility.

VUČJAK AND THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF CONTAINMENT

In spring 2019, this fragmented circulation mirrored broader tensions in the city of Bihać and its surroundings. Formal camps were overcrowded, and those unable to access them were sleeping in abandoned buildings or makeshift camps (Gentili, Minca & Weima 2026; Jordan & Minca 2023; Davies, Isakjee & Obradovic-Wochnik 2024). In Bihać, anti-migrant discourse against the presence of people on the move in the canton intensified considerably during 2019 and 2020. Public protests began to appear in the main square – small, silent gatherings at first, where residents expressed discontent over the “migrant presence” (Fieldnotes 2019; Klix 2020). As Helms (2023) highlights, such discourse was also fueled through social media and everyday conversations, transforming widespread fears

into increasingly negative and dehumanizing narratives. These discourses targeted not only migrants but also those providing assistance, placing the latter on the “pro-migrant” side and portraying them as responsible for encouraging migrants to remain in Bihać and Una-Sana Canton. Additionally, Helms notes that online platforms and “anti-migrant” groups contributed to spreading sensationalist and often false content, reinforcing the perception of migrants as threats to security and public order (Helms 2023, 291–292). This escalating discourse contributed to a broader shift in how mobility itself was understood in the city. The presence of people on the move was increasingly framed as a problem to be managed, a source of contamination to be contained.

By early summer 2019, with the return of the Bosnian diaspora for the holidays and the arrival of tourists drawn to the beautiful Una River, its waterfalls and natural landscapes, Bihać became a city of overlapping and competing circulations. The mobilities of the diaspora and tourists clashed with the unwanted, precarious mobility of those in transit. The municipality, anticipating tensions and seeking to restore the city’s “image”, decided to relocate migrants outside the urban perimeter. Thus, in June 2019, the site of Vučjak, a former landfill located on a plateau around 10 kilometers from the city and only a few kilometers from the Croatian border, near areas still scattered with landmines dating back to the wars of the 1990s, was designated as a temporary camp. This decision and its implementation illustrate how municipal authorities attempted to manage and control the circulation of people on the move in the city. As Marine, from the youth organization *U Pokretu* in Bihać, explained:

The police loaded all the people they saw in the city into a van to take them to Vučjak. [...] What had been said by the municipality about Vučjak was that since Bihać relies on tourism and the diaspora during the summer, it looked “bad” for the city to have hundreds of migrant men walking through the streets, so they decided to open Vučjak for this, saying that at the end of the summer the camp would be closed, because it is in the high mountains. The idea was to close it in September, but every month this was postponed, until [finally] it was closed in December 2019 with the arrival of the first snow. (Marine, *U Pokretu* Programme Manager. Bihać June 2023)

Also known as the “jungle camp” (Pozniak 2022; Gentili, Minca & Weima 2026), far from being a safe space, the new camp operated as a site of segregation (Katz 2017): migrants were concentrated in tents pitched

on contaminated and hazardous terrain, with limited sanitation, water available only for a few hours each day, and constant police supervision (Mlinarević & Ahmetašević 2022; Minca 2022). Although residents were formally free to leave and attempt to cross the nearby border, the material conditions of the camp made any movement precarious and risky, transforming the site into a device of control and containment (Martin, Minca & Katz 2020; Hagan 2022).

Vučjak materialized a regime in which people were not detained in place but displaced to spaces of isolation and exposure (Hameršak et al. 2020; Tazzioli 2019; Stojić Mitrović & Vilenica 2021).



Image 2: Vučjak Makeshift Camp (Bosnia-Herzegovina), June 2019.

Photo: IPSIA BiH

During my work with IPSIA that summer, we decided to go twice a week to Vučjak to distribute tea to people on the move at the makeshift camp. Along the road to Zavalje, it was common to encounter police units forcing migrants to sit on the ground in the sun or escorting them on foot for kilometers, driving behind them to ensure they returned to Vučjak. These scenes show how migrants were not simply moved, but forcibly *driven into* the camp, pressed into a sequence of coerced movement.

That was one of the worst periods for refugees. The special forces police chased them all the way and transferred them to Vučjak. It was catastrophic; those were tents without toilets – it was the former city dump. However, people kept running away from the police and returning to the city. Wherever the police found someone, they put them in vans. First, they beat them a little, then they put them in the van, and then they took them back up there again [to Vučjak]. People organized themselves and went to the meadows. Some made tents out of nylon and other materials. They had a really hard time that winter. Back then, I had an old Mercedes, so I always picked up supplies and went to those makeshift sites. We gave them as much as we could – wood, clothes, food. We gave them everything we could. (Asim, local activist. Bihać, September 2024)

The mobility of people on the move was not free, but imposed, channeled and constantly redirected: a system of forced mobility that reproduced the logic of the border within the national territory. This illustrates how one of the main strategies for governing migrants' mobility consists in what Tazzioli (2020) describes as the *politics of dispersal*, that is, scattering people across space and limiting their opportunities for autonomous movement (Tazzioli 2020, 4–10).

Ultimately, as Minca (2022) highlights, Vučjak demonstrates that containment is not only a matter of building camps but of infrastructuring conditions in which mobility becomes unlivable. The camp's closure in December 2019, prompted by rapidly deteriorating winter conditions, strong international pressure and the explicit refusal of humanitarian organizations to operate at a site they considered unfit for human presence, did not signal the end of this logic. The Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, repeatedly called for its immediate shutdown, warning that the conditions were "unacceptable for human life" and that, without intervention, people would soon "start dying" (Council of Europe 2019).

As Pozniak (2022) describes, the landfill near Bihać operated both as a parallel world for unwanted migrants and as a mirror of contemporary socio-political realities. Despite the existence of multiple legal instruments concerning refugees and human rights, such spaces continue to emerge: human dumping grounds located close to European centers or at their peripheries, yet sufficiently distant so as not to disturb everyday life for local residents.

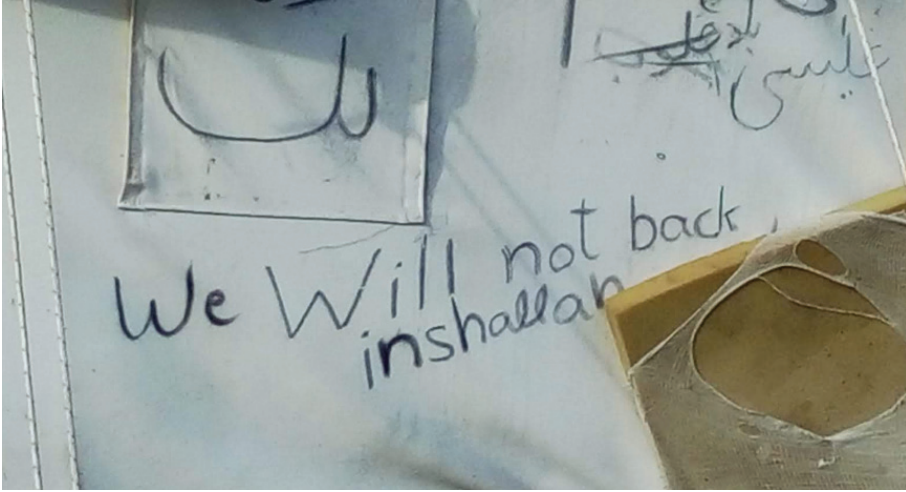


Image 3: Tent in Vučjak Makeshift Camp (Bosnia-Herzegovina), June 2019.
Photo: IPSIA BiH

Through repeated displacements, hazardous routes and the constant threat of police enforcement, migrants were kept in motion while denied meaningful freedom of movement. Vučjak thus stands as a stark illustration of how contemporary migration governance operates through the management of ‘unwanted’ migrant mobility (Tazzioli 2021), transforming movement itself into a technique of control.

NO MAN’S LAND: GOVERNING MOBILITY AT THE “INVISIBLE” INTERNAL BORDER

I remember that 2020 was a turbulent year. There were protests in Sarajevo. In the square in Bihać there were huge protests, and then also in Velika Kladuša [...]. Then at one point, there were special police forces around the city, and everyone was moved to Bosanska Otoka. There is what we call a “no man’s land”. So this was the practice from the first day, when the beneficiaries were arriving by train. They would stop the trains in Bosanska Otoka and tell everybody that there was a village and there were points where the beneficiaries would wait. (Kenan, humanitarian worker. Bihać, October 2023)

The situation in Bosanska Otoka (a small village in the municipality of Bosanska Krupa and the last town in Una-Sana Canton before entering the Republika Srpska) between 2019 and 2020 provides another exam-

ple of how state authorities in Una-Sana Canton actively regulated and constrained the mobility of people on the move. During this period, many attempted to reach the canton from Sarajevo via a recently reintroduced train line. As Campbell, Hameršak and Stojić Mitrović (2025) note, the re-opening of the route from the Bosnian capital to towns near the Croatian border coincided with a marked increase in the number of people on the move. Within the local imagination, this line came to signify the authorities' strategy of redistributing migrants from the capital to the northern parts of the country (Campbell, Hameršak & Stojić Mitrović 2025, 7).

The trainline passed through Republika Srpska before entering Una-Sana Canton at the internal administrative border between Bosanski Novi and Bosanska Otoka. Similar to bus operations in Velečevo, the train was closely monitored by police: officers boarded as soon as it stopped in Bosanska Otoka and ordered the passengers identified as migrants to disembark. Those removed often became trapped in the area, unable to continue their journey freely, mirroring the coercive control experienced by migrants forced off buses.

In practice, migrants, including families and unaccompanied and separated children, frequently found themselves stranded in Bosanska Otoka overnight, exposed to harsh weather conditions. Some were forced to sleep outdoors, while others relied on taxis or informal transport to continue their journey. These interventions did not immobilize migrants entirely but channeled their movement in controlled ways, producing once again a system of containment (Tazzioli 2020). In conversation with Talal, a humanitarian worker who was active in the area, he recounted how mobility was managed and constrained at the Bosanska Otoka train station:

The train from Sarajevo used to arrive in Bosanska Otoka around 2 a.m., coming from Banja Luka. Since Bosanska Otoka is at the boundary between the Federation and Republika Srpska and the entrance to Una-Sana Canton, the police would stop the train there and check how many spaces were available in the camp through the NGOs. Only that number of people could stay on the train; the rest were taken off, put in a police car or bus, and driven a few kilometers to the actual boundary between the Federation and Republika Srpska, where they were left in the middle of the street at 2 a.m. at night. After being left there, all these people had to walk to Bihać. It was usually single men, with a few families in some cases. Taxis were always waiting for them. Everyone knew about it. There were many cases where people were sleeping there. The police knew it was ineffective. Actually, the police were completely against it;

they never liked what they were doing and told me it made no sense.
(Talal, humanitarian worker. Zagreb, July 2024)

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified this dynamic, layering public health measures onto existing modalities of border and mobility control. Local protests added another layer, pressuring authorities to act while simultaneously shaping migrants' access to urban spaces. Protests against migrants intensified in August 2020, first in Velika Kladuša and then in Bihać. In Bihać, on 29 August, local residents and anti-migrant groups gathered to protest in the city square. I passed through the square to observe the situation and witnessed a large crowd: the space was full, and the atmosphere was tense. While the protests expressed opposition to the presence of migrants in urban areas, there was also significant resentment toward international organizations, particularly UN agencies, with presence of the IOM as a focal point of local frustration.

In this context, Bosanska Otoka again became a central site of immobility and containment. As had happened a year earlier in the case of Vučjak, special forces police could often be seen patrolling the streets of Bihać in search of people on the move. Migrants were often loaded onto vans, spending hours inside them while officers continued to identify and detain others, before transporting them all to the internal administrative border between Bosanska Otoka and Bosanski Novi. The town functioned as a key point in the cantonal mobility control system, concentrating migrants in a remote area while disrupting their attempts to move around the urban space or reach Bihać. In this sense, Bosanska Otoka functioned as an internal "no man's land" where mobility was governed through enforced waiting and spatial confinement. This can be understood, following Leshem and Pinkerton (2016), as a space produced through the simultaneous dynamics of abandonment and enclosure, whereby people on the move were effectively suspended between two regimes of control while remaining excluded from both. Through these practices, the authorities maintained the semblance of freedom of movement while effectively governing the spatial trajectories of people on the move, reinforcing patterns of dispersal and precariousness within the national territory.

Bosanska Otoka is where Una-Sana canton ends and the Republika Srpska begins. They [people on the move] were brought by buses to that border, an imaginary border of course. They were thrown off and the police from the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina were standing there not letting them [turn back], while the police from Republika Srpska

were standing a few hundred meters away and were not letting them pass any further. If you have seen the film by Danis Tanović *No Man's Land*, this is it. So, they could not go either left or right. They kept people for days in some kind of enclave, surrounded, also without water, without food and without anything. (Anela, local activist. Bihać, May 2023)

At the end of August 2020, with my colleagues from IPSIA and other volunteers, we went to monitor the situation at this “internal border” and organized the distribution of some food with the collaboration and support of other local organizations. In Bosanska Otoka, migrants were stuck in a cornfield, a veritable no man's land. The term “no man's land” was used by local interlocutors to describe this space of enforced immobility and abandonment. Building on this, I conceptualize it as a site where overlapping jurisdictional controls suspend movement and produce zones of containment and exclusion within state territory. As Anela reported, on one side of the area, the Republika Srpska police prevented migrants from crossing into their territory, while on our side, Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina police blocked people on the move from transiting further into Federation territory. We stopped to talk to a police officer, who told us how surreal the situation was. He also did not understand why people on the move were not allowed to proceed. He told us that they often had to call the IOM because, in many cases, there were also families with children stuck there (Fieldnotes 2020). These situations became sites of prolonged immobility, environmental exposure, and invisibility.

These episodes exemplify how European border management strategies were applied unevenly at the local level. Lockdowns, relocations, and enforcement blended pandemic health measures with border security objectives, creating a hybrid governance regime (Hess & Kasperek 2017; Walters, Heller & Pezzani 2022). Across these sites, internal “no man's lands” functioned as a dispersed infrastructure of containment, fragmenting mobility across the territory rather than halting it along a single border line. Mobility was not merely curtailed; it was orchestrated to produce exhaustion, invisibility, and fragmentation, while migrants sought creative strategies to continue their journeys.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper discusses the ways in which mobility in Una-Sana Canton was systematically governed, fragmented and obstructed over the period 2019–2020. The combination of internal administrative borders, policing practices, and relocations to remote areas produced a hybrid regime in

which mobility was both enforced and constrained, creating a highly precarious landscape of movement, waiting and exposure.

The practices described in this paper demonstrate that governance in Una-Sana Canton operated not only through forms of immobilization, such as confinement within camps, but also through more subtle mechanisms of forced circulation. People on the move were not simply detained or blocked; they were actively redirected, coerced into traversing inhospitable geographies and subjected to repeated interruptions of their journeys. Whether migrants were removed from buses, forced to walk to Vučjak under police supervision, or left stranded in remote areas, their movement was regulated, producing exhaustion, disorientation and prolonged precarity. These practices illustrate how internal borders, even when invisible or unofficial, can structure mobility in ways that reproduce the logic of external border regimes within a national territory.

The uneven application of mobility restrictions also underscores the significance of what Hromadžić (2025) terms “patchy internalization”. Across Una-Sana Canton, measures of containment were selectively enforced with official checkpoints that regulated the movement of groups, pushing them temporarily outside urban oversight to navigate “no man’s land” spaces and informal settlements. This uneven enforcement produced differential vulnerabilities, reinforcing hierarchies of access and exclusion. Lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic intensified these dynamics, as public health concerns were used to justify stricter containment measures, further limiting access to urban spaces, curtailing informal mobility, and reinforcing perceptions of migrants as sources of risk. Yet, even in these highly controlled environments, migrants continuously found ways to resist, and navigate barriers, highlighting the relational and negotiated character of mobility.

The repeated cycles of displacement and containment in Una-Sana Canton also shed light on the broader politics of the Balkan Route. Bihać, as a central hub in this migratory route, exemplifies how local infrastructures, administrative measures and police practices intersect with transnational governance structures to produce uneven and temporally fragmented mobility. Pushbacks at the Croatian border, internal administrative checkpoints and localized enforcement practices illustrate that border control extends far beyond the external boundary of the EU, embedding itself into everyday geographies and rhythms of life within Bosnia-Herzegovina.

By relocating migrants to peripheral or remote areas, authorities limit opportunities for autonomous movement and produce isolated and highly

precarious living conditions. It is important to note that these practices, although less visible, have continued to be actively implemented in the governance of mobility in the region in the years following the protests and the COVID-19 pandemic. In recent years, all formal and informal camps in urban and surrounding areas have been completely closed, leading to the construction of a single camp, Lipa, in a remote mountainous area within the Una-Sana Canton, funded by EU resources. The politics of dispersal (Tazzioli 2020) intersects with other mechanisms of control, including selective police interventions, and limitations on aid provision, to reproduce a broader logic of containment. While migrants are technically allowed to move, the spatial, temporal, and infrastructural constraints imposed upon them function collectively to limit agency, autonomy and the ability to plan and execute journeys effectively. In this sense, dispersal operates as a tool of mobility governance, producing precarity and vulnerability while maintaining the appearance of mobility.

By documenting how Una-Sana Canton functioned as a site of controlled mobility, forced circulation, and fragmented containment, the paper highlights the ways in which borders are enacted internally, producing conditions of hypermobility (Tazzioli 2020) and vulnerability simultaneously. These three empirical examples should not be understood as isolated cases, but as interconnected configurations through which the governance of (im)mobility is articulated in Una-Sana Canton. While they share certain features with what has been described as bottlenecking (Helms 2025), they also allow for a more differentiated analysis of how mobility is variously redirected, obstructed and contained across spaces. The analysis demonstrates that the governance of migration extends beyond conventional border spaces into everyday urban and peripheral geographies, where legal, institutional, and social processes converge to structure mobility. However, even in the most restrictive environments, migrants are not passive actors: they continue to challenge, circumvent and reshape the structures imposed upon them.

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