

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2298/GEI2601047K>

UDC: 39:314.15(450)

original research paper

HANA KONJEDIC

Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Ljubljana

hk68117@student.uni-lj.si

<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-2836-2918>

## Material Residues: An Ethnography of Migratory Traces in the Trieste Borderlands

The article presents and analyses material traces of irregularized migration in Trieste hinterland. Its theoretical foundations are complemented by two ethnographic fieldworks conducted in 2023 and 2025 in Trieste and its surroundings, among people who arrived in Trieste via the Balkan route and among the local inhabitants of the Trieste hinterland. The research shows that one of the key indicators of the hidden movement of people through this area is the presence of material traces at the town's edges or within the forests. Considering the experiences of the interviewees, the article describes how diverse perceptions and terms attributed to the tangible traces of migration movements in this area are. Furthermore, it discusses the discourse that labels the material residues of irregularized migration as "waste", which is consequently the reason for their removal from the environment. Above all, this article aims to show why researching the material traces of contemporary migration is important and necessary.

*Keywords:* migration, Balkan route, material traces, forests, Trieste hinterland

## Материјални остаци: етнографија миграционих трагова у пограничју Трста

Овај чланак представља и анализира материјалне трагове ирегуларизованих миграција у околини Трста. Његова теоријска полазишта допуњена су са два етнографска теренска истраживања, спроведена 2023. и 2025. го-

дине у Трсту и његовој широј околини, међу људима који су у Трст стигли Балканском рутом, као и међу локалним становништвом шире околине Трста. Истраживање показује да је кључни показатељ скривеног кретања људи кроз ово подручје присуство материјалних трагова на рубовима насеља или унутар шума. Ослањајући се на искуства саговорника, чланак описује колико су разноврсне перцепције и појмови који се приписују опипљивим траговима миграционих кретања у овом подручју. Даље, разматра се и дискурс који материјалне остатке ирегуларизованих миграција означава као „отпад“, што је последично разлог њиховог уклањања из окружења. Изнад свега, овај чланак има за циљ да покаже зашто је истраживање материјалних трагова савремених миграција важно и неопходно.

*Кључне речи:* миграције, Балканска рута, материјални трагови, шуме, околина Трста

## INTRODUCTION

Positioned along the north-western segment of the so-called Balkan route, Trieste and its surrounding mountain valleys of the Karst plateau have seen an intensification of migrant arrivals over the course of recent years. The Karst represents a border region between Slovenia and Italy, across which “the border line runs along a higher ridge, dividing the landscape into a narrower Italian section with a coastline and a larger Slovenian rural section with sparse to moderately dense settlement” (Lampič 2017, 60). Despite these differences, the borderland is connected by a “continuous forested area that creates the impression of no border between the two states” (Konjedic 2023). The forested terrain includes three nature reserves, which, together with the surrounding landscape, have been a part of Natura 2000 network since 2009. From this perspective, the forests of the Trieste hinterland represent an attractive destination for numerous visitors, providing space for recreation and other leisure activities. At the same time, however, these forests are also traversed daily by migrants seeking to reach urban centres while avoiding detection by regional authorities. As a result, the forested landscape surrounding Trieste has become a space of both direct and indirect contact between people on the move and local inhabitants. In this article, I focus specifically on ‘indirect contact’ through migrant traces, and the strategic ways in which people on the move navigate their (in)visibility. Within this framework, the focus on materiality emerges as a key perspective on contemporary irregularized migration flows in this area, aiming “to shed light onto the density and complexity of Trieste’s vernacular spaces and to offer depth to

the experiences of people in wait – as well as underline how the material realm can become a site of struggle and resistance” (Bergesio 2025, 129).

The article draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted during two periods, the first in March 2023, as a part of e-ERIM<sup>1</sup> online platform, and the second in July and August 2025, as a part of my bachelor thesis research. In March 2023 I focused primarily on understanding the spatial embeddedness of material traces of migration in the forests of Trieste hinterland, while in July and August 2025 I expanded my research to include an understanding of the reasons for their emergence, as well as the ways in which they are perceived. Since I understand material traces as one of the practices of the autonomy of migration, I continuously sought to balance the desire to answer my research questions with respect for boundaries of privacy (see Nared 2022) in my conversations with people on the move. Irregularized migration is a continuously evolving and dynamic process, which appears highly fragmented from a research perspective. For this reason, returning to the field is essential, since modes of movement, practices, and survival strategies are constantly being shaped and reshaped in response to structural and direct violence, as well as existing migration control regimes. The 2025 fieldwork was therefore conceived as a return to and re-engagement with the earlier research, through which I sought to assess whether the material traces documented in 2023 were still present and, if so, in what scope. From this perspective, I conducted majority of my fieldwork in the natural landscapes of the municipalities of Trieste, San Dorligo della Valle and Monrupino, a bilingual area where both Italian and Slovenian are spoken.

As part of ethnography, I observed the nature of the border area through walking. Walks through forested landscapes and village outskirts proved to be a central methodological tool, allowing me to experience the space with all my senses while also observing material traces within their spatial context. Visits to forested areas brought up numerous questions in me, including ethical ones. I often found myself reflecting on the position I occupy as a researcher. Although I had a clearly defined research purpose before going into the field, I repeatedly questioned what I was actually doing and why. How does my presence affect the space I am observing? Thoughts like these accompanied me as I entered the forests around Trieste

---

<sup>1</sup> “E-ERIM is an online network of keywords of the European irregularized migration regime at the periphery of the EU. It was created as part of the scientific research project ERIM, *The European Irregularized Migration Regime at the Periphery of the EU: From Ethnography to Keywords*” (e-ERIM 2026).

which represent a transitional point toward Western and Central Europe for many people on the move. I was aware that the responsibility is always mine, therefore I approached the research setting making decisions that respected both the safety of people on the move and research integrity. For this reason, my method of research in the forests was based exclusively on an observational approach, which I supported with visual documentation using a digital camera or a personal phone. In this way, I merely observed and documented material traces without actively interfering with them.

For research purposes, I also conducted four semi-structured interviews and had numerous informal conversations. All interviews were carried out with locals from the hinterland of Trieste, while I used informal conversations exclusively for interactions with people who declined to have their conversations recorded or those whom, due to specific circumstances, I did not ask to record. Four semi-structured interviews were recorded on an audio device and later transcribed in the dialect spoken by the interlocutors, whereas the information and statements obtained during informal conversations were written down in my fieldnotes. I cite them anonymously and include the date on which the conversation took place. For quotations from informal conversations, I add the label “fieldnotes”. Due to the sensitive nature of the research topic, the numerous informal conversations, and in accordance with the consent agreements signed by all four interviewees, I have decided to maintain the anonymity of all participants. Any data pertaining to individuals is therefore presented in a manner that prevents their identification.

## WEAPONIZED FOREST LANDSCAPE

Throughout history forests have served as shelters for various groups of people while also being spaces of control and regulation. For instance, many sought refuge in them during World War II (Kimball 2020), later in the 1990s during the wars accompanying the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Hameršak et al. 2020, 16), and also in recent decades by those forced to flee due to civil wars (Volpicelli 2018, 1), as well as crisis hotspots, natural disasters, etc., in the Middle East and beyond (e.g., Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh). Parallels between past and present are also evident in regimes of control, such as the erection of wire fences on state borders (see Jovanović Horvat 2024).

When discussing forests in the context of migration, the term “weaponized landscape” (Pleše & Hameršak 2022) is used as a central concept to describe natural environments. The term “weaponized” in this context suggests that natural landscapes have “transformed from a neutral nat-

ural environment into active factors for the creation and maintenance of border control regimes as well as for deterring and expelling unwanted migrants” (Hameršak & Pleše 2021, 205). Since the concept manifests in various geographical settings, Pleše and Hameršak (2022) provide specific examples of weaponized landscapes. In the countries on the Balkan route, they include forests, rivers, and mountains, while elsewhere they consist of deserts, seas or archipelagos.

The diverse forms of weaponized landscapes demonstrate that natural spaces in various geographical and political contexts are consistently integrated into the politics of controlling human mobility. “To put it concisely, they are landscapes that are reshaped and used as one more weapon in the obsessive ‘fight’ against ‘illegal migration’” (Hameršak & Pleše 2021, 217), the authors conclude in their article. With this, they emphasize that these landscapes do not merely function as passive spaces but as active tools in European and local migration policies. This is, in fact, an example of the aforementioned securitization, through which these policies close state borders, monitor with technological devices, and forcibly redirect human movements into difficult-to-traverse and often dangerous areas such as forests, mountains, and rivers. In this context, nature acts as an armed landscape, obscuring political responsibility for suffering and, in the worst cases, even deaths, as accountability is shifted onto seemingly neutral forces of nature (Hameršak & Pleše 2021, 216). The potentially fatal consequences of such practices are also confirmed by the testimony of a local resident from the Municipality of San Dorligo della Valle:

Down there, if we're talking down by the hill, in Dolina below, where So-cerb is. You know where – that's where they used to pass by a lot, and a couple of them even died there. When they jumped down, they died. At night, they couldn't see, it was high up, they didn't know [the terrain], and they fell down. People have died from things like that. (Interviewee from the Municipality of San Dorligo della Valle, interview, 11/7/2025)

The interviewee's statement clearly indicates that the consequences of repressive migration policies can be fatal (see Hameršak 2025). Through such cases, a seemingly neutral natural landscape of forests is in the context of migration transformed into a space with a distinctly social and political role. As in the case of Croatian forests, discussed by Hameršak and Pleše, the forested areas along the Slovenian-Italian border also prove to be “hostile and dangerous environments for people on the move, as well as key factors in controlling unwanted migration” (Hameršak & Pleše 2021, 206).

Alongside the discussion of weaponized landscape as a practice of control, the authors also highlight forest encounters. For people on the move, encounters with locals in the woods are (usually) undesirable, as they pose a risk of police reporting (see Budič 2024) and subsequent pushback. From this perspective, the forest primarily functions as a refuge and a space for unnoticed movement, since it allows people to:

[...] hide from unwelcome encounters, and (almost) every encounter is unwelcome and has the potential to result in a pushback. In fact, such encounters with others are one of the few mandatory elements of every pushback report since a pushback is the result of an encounter with authorities. (Czerny et al. 2022, 218)

Contrary to the police's role as an institution responsible for protection and assistance, encounters, when they involve direct interaction between authorities and people on the move, often unfold in a manner where "people are injured, captured, humiliated, tortured, and subjected to suffering" (Hameršak & Pleše 2021, 205). However, not all encounters lead to reporting to authorities, as interactions between people on the move and others in the forests are frequently less hostile. Often, as I will demonstrate in the core of this article, contact is also established indirectly. In such cases, people on the move are perceived "only through the traces they leave behind (discarded clothing, food remains) or in the form of shadows that appear at forest edges, in isolated and remote locations" (Lipovec Čebren, Ivnik & Fekonja 2019, 138). This suggests that the meaning of migration materialities is layered and too often understood only indirectly, without actual contact with their former owners.

## TRACES IN THE FOREST

The forested areas of the Trieste hinterland act as transit spaces where people on the move seek to remain as inconspicuous as possible to authorities and local residents (Czerny et al. 2022, 218). Key indicators of clandestine human movement in this area are the material traces found at forest edges or inside the forests. Whether discarded or forgotten, these objects demonstrate that human mobility is inevitably intertwined with the movement of things. Thus, the material traces that have become part of this forested landscape are a consequence of transnational movements "and all of them speak of the hardship of the journey, of people on the move and their helpers, but also of those trying to stop them" (Hameršak et al. 2025).

Material traces, typically observed near border crossings (though not exclusively), are not unique to the Trieste hinterland but are common across many regions of the Balkan route and other migration routes. This is evidenced by scholarly research stemming from field studies along the Slovenian-Italian (Altin 2021; 2025), Slovenian-Croatian (Prinčič 2024), Polish-Belarusian (Judzińska & Sendyka 2022), Russian-Finnish (Seitsonen et al. 2017), and Mexican-American border (De León 2015), as well as in the Mediterranean along the coasts of Lesbos and Turkey (Jungfleisch 2025). Numerous trace locations in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have also been documented in the fold-out map “Ethnographic Research Map (2020–2024)”, produced as part of the ERIM project (Hameršak et al. 2025).

As Jungfleisch (2025) clearly notes, researching the material traces of contemporary migration is important for two reasons. First, migrations, while primarily a social phenomenon, are also deeply material. Their materiality manifests in the previously mentioned practices of weaponized landscapes (e.g., barbed wire, walls, fences, border crossings, advanced surveillance technologies) as well as in the personal belongings migrants carry with them. Second, Jungfleisch highlights the invisibility of the migration spaces where these traces are found and the unseen events occurring within them. Precisely for this reason, material traces serve as indicators and evidence, offering insights into aspects of migratory movements that might otherwise go unnoticed. From this, we can conclude that material traces are not merely physical evidence of migration flows in a given area but also carriers of information about the less visible and often concealed aspects of migration processes. Jungfleisch himself emphasizes this in his article when he writes:

Along their journey, migrants often leave behind some of these items – whether consciously, accidentally, or under compulsion. These objects form distinctive material cultures, carrying important information about past and ongoing migration processes. (Jungfleisch 2025, 983)

I find it important to emphasize that the cited author, Johannes Jungfleisch, is an archaeologist. In fact, while reviewing the scholarly literature, I noticed that many researchers of material traces of migration (including those mentioned above) hold degrees in archaeology. In an interview conducted by Marijana Hameršak with the author of the influential book *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*, Jason De León discusses the role of contemporary archaeology in relation to researching material traces of migration, stating:

For me, archaeology is just a new lens to bring into this conversation that I think can really help people. We are seeing it happen around the globe in relation to migration. People are doing archaeological work in Lampedusa, in Greece, and these other places. It is because, as ethnographers, we are trying to watch, we are trying to observe this social process that is hidden, that is clandestine, and that is oftentimes difficult to access, but it leaves an archaeological footprint. [...] I hope, in the long run, that archaeology can help us maintain a better understanding of those things, because over time our memories change and the storytelling evolves and things get whitewashed. (Hameršak & De León 2022, 243)

In the interview, De León, drawing on his own field experience in the Sonoran Desert, shows how archaeological and anthropological approaches to the material traces of migration can work together and interweave. The method combines observation of social processes with the analysis of the objects left behind by people who have crossed the border. Within an archaeological frame these objects become material evidence of migratory movements, while within an anthropological one they are carriers of meaning assigned to the traces by both people on the move and local communities. It is precisely these differing meanings that I examine more closely in the remainder of the article.

## PERSONAL BELONGINGS OF PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

The following chapter is based solely on my personal fieldnotes, which I recorded in a field diary on the basis of the narratives of eight individuals who arrived in Trieste via the Balkan route. Their perspectives offer insight into individual experiences while simultaneously revealing a fragmented part of their complex journey. It's important to recognize that thousands of others, whose experiences and stories are not captured in this work, have also traversed this path. Although this article opens an important as well as often misunderstood and overlooked view, it represents only a small piece of the broader mosaic of migration stories from this region.

In their accounts, people on the move most frequently used the English term “things” to refer to items they had intentionally left behind, been forced to abandon, or lost by accident during the Balkan route. The usage of this term suggests a broad and vague designation encompassing an individual's entire private belongings at a given moment during their journey. In their descriptions, people I spoke with were not particularly detailed, often mentioning just one to three items: bags, backpacks, cloth-

ing, phones, personal documents, water, and food. For instance, one of the Pashto-speaking individuals, when describing his crossing of the Slovenian-Italian border, spoke mostly about clothing. He explained that changing clothes in border areas varies from person to person, as some arrive at the border already wearing good, clean outfits. When asked where they get the clothes, he replied that they are sometimes provided to them by smugglers (Konjedic, fieldnotes, 7/8/2025).

In his research on the U.S.–Mexico border, Jason De León cites three reasons why people discard belongings during their journey (2015, 191). While his description of these reasons is by no means universal, it aligns with my findings at the Slovenian-Italian border, so I reference his accounts. Firstly, De León notes items like used food and drink packaging or damaged, torn clothing and backpacks that are no longer functional. Secondly, he highlights exhaustion, which often makes it difficult for people to continue carrying backpacks and other personal items (De León 2015, 191). Two participants of Pakistani origin also emphasized this second reason, explaining in their own words:

Sometimes it's very difficult to take all the things with you. If bag is too much heavy, it's difficult to cross the borders or to go up on the mountains. It's very difficult and sometimes we put them around the borders or on the mountains. (Konjedic, fieldnotes, 13/7/2025)

Furthermore, beyond exhaustion, encounters with authorities or wild animals can trigger fear, leading individuals to discard belongings in a panic. De León further explains in his book that authorities may force people to abandon all their possessions before boarding vehicles (2015, 191). Three people I spoke with mentioned such encounters with officials. An Urdu-speaking person described a similar experience to De León's example when police apprehended him at the Croatian-Bosnian border, resulting in the loss of all his personal items, including his backpack and food. His account didn't clarify whether this occurred under coercion or while fleeing. A Pashto-speaking interviewee, for instance, also highlighted fleeing from authorities and explained that during the "Game",<sup>2</sup> he discarded his backpack because it hindered his running speed. "If you have a back-

---

<sup>2</sup> Hameršak et al. (2025) define it as: "An informal term for clandestine attempts to cross borders and move from the countries at the European peripheries to the ones in the center of the continent. It includes evading police controls, constantly hiding in means of transportation, on forest paths, in mountains, and making dangerous crossings of rivers and even minefields" (see also Mucko, Pleše & Škokić 2025).

pack, they catch you easily”, he said (Konjedic, fieldnotes, 13/7/2025). A third respondent who had arrived in Italy from Turkey said the same. The experiences shared by people on the move thus suggest that material traces along the migration route are not random but systematically shaped by border regimes and surveillance practices. Consequently, personal belongings migrants abandon can also serve as indicators of past push-backs, as their reports frequently highlight “the destruction and appropriation of property (mobile phones, chargers, money, documents, backpacks [see Backpack],<sup>3</sup> clothing, footwear and other items)” (Hameršak & Mucko 2025, 168). In this context, material traces also serve as one of the elements for identifying violent practices of expelling unwanted groups of people.

As one of the most common reasons for discarding items along the migration route, De León cites the so-called final phase of transition or exit from a weaponized landscape (2015, 191). While on the Mexican-American border this territory is represented by the desert, it is characterized by a forested area on the Slovenian-Italian border. As De León describes, in this case these are meeting points between people on the move and smugglers, resulting in larger dumping sites of discarded material:

Typically, when people arrive at pickup sites, their smugglers tell them to clean up their appearance (e.g. brush their teeth, put on deodorant, and change into clean clothes) so it is not apparent that they just wandered through the desert. This shedding of clothes and backpacks is an attempt to discard all incriminating evidence that would signal someone as an undocumented migrant (De León 2015, 192).

In the field I did not obtain any information as to whether smugglers also give people crossing the Slovenian-Italian border such instructions. As already mentioned above, only one person pointed out that smugglers sometimes provide them with new clothes before they enter the urban centre of Trieste.

A young man from Bangladesh spoke about deliberately discarding personal belongings before entering urban centres. When describing his migration route to Trieste, he repeatedly singled out the backpack as a recognisable object, a potential threat, or an “identification mark” (Walters 2014, 47 in Budimir, Kuna & Pekić 2023) through which, he noticed, the police more easily identify irregularized migrants. He himself stressed:

---

<sup>3</sup> The title of the e-ERIM keyword written by students from Zagreb – Budimir, Kuna and Pekić (2023).

If you have backpack, they catch you easily, that's why in my mind I said no backpack I only go like this – like a tourist. (Konjedic, fieldnotes, 7/8/2025)

He explained his decision based on experience when he was traveling part of the route with three other individuals. Everyone in the group except him was carrying backpacks. At a certain point they encountered the police. Only his companions were stopped and asked for documents. He goes on to say that the police detained them, while he continued the journey alone.

“Some people always travel with backpack, but I when I come, I throw backpack in border area and then I go like tourist.” (Konjedic, fieldnotes, 7/8/2025)

He said that since then he has avoided both groups and carrying backpacks in urban environments. While analysing the field material I noticed that the respondent's information establishes numerous parallels with the findings of the e-ERIM keyword *Backpack* (Budimir, Kuna & Pekić 2023), based on fieldwork in the Trieste hinterland, specifically in the Municipality of San Dorligo della Valle, where I also conducted my own field research. The authors, present possible reasons for the placement of a backpack on the outskirts of the village of Sant'Antonio in Bosco through detailed descriptions. My interlocutor's experience complements the contribution by showing that the abandonment of personal belongings can be a deliberate response by migrants to coercive surveillance practices. From this perspective, the practice of discarding personal items emerges as a key survival tactic for people on the Balkan route.

## WHAT TRACES?

“Back there in the woods behind the house there's piles of clothes and stuff” (interviewee from the Municipality of Monrupino, interview, 12/7/2025), a local woman told me in our interview. She said she noticed the material traces a few months before our talk. When asked whether she recalls any specific object, she added: “I didn't stop to look properly, no. I just saw some T-shirts, like, clothes lying around. Nothing special”. (interviewee from the Municipality of Monrupino, interview, 12/7/2025) Her observation is complemented by the account of a local man from the Municipality of San Dorligo della Valle, who recalls encountering the following objects in the woods before the COVID-19 pandemic:

So, we found – well phones, quite a few phones. [...] Also those things, those power banks you can charge your phone with. Lots of those as well. And documents... confetti, the kind you throw at carnival – they'd made confetti [out of them]. They were left with nothing. The documents they had were the ones they'd been given down in Bosnia, in the refugee camp. That's where they got them. (Interviewee from the Municipality of San Dorligo della Valle, interview, 11/7/2025)

Respondents' observations show how varied perceptions of material traces can be. While one woman speaks mainly of clothing, a man lists a wider array of things: broken phones, power banks, destroyed documents. The difference suggests that traces are not self-evident. They appear in multiple forms and are noticed and described in different ways by different people. Similarly, my own fieldwork experiences differed both from my interlocutors' observations and among themselves, as I recorded different traces in March 2023 than in July 2025 when I revisited the Trieste hinterland. At that time, under the heading *Traces in the Forest*, I wrote:

In Socerb, where we traversed only a small section of the “land passage between Eastern and Central Europe” (Altin 2020, 203), we encountered numerous diverse objects scattered across the forest floor. Among the majority were energy drink cans (e.g. Red Bull, Bulldog, Rockstar), coffee beverage cups (e.g. Emmi, Turkcaffé, Monster), and pieces of clothing or their labels (e.g. Skinny, Smog, Crane). Among the rarer items were an insulin injection pen, a phone card, and an official document from the Republic of Croatia, the so-called “7-day paper”. Without any planned direction, these discarded objects led us deeper into the forest's interior. (Konjedic 2023)

This year, however, when I visited a section of the border forest under the jurisdiction of the Municipality of San Dorligo della Valle, I recorded the following observations in my fieldnotes:

Many pairs of shoes, though most often just one from each pair. Most objects along a dry streambed. I assume they are carried further downstream during the rainy season. I documented an empty backpack labelled XMXSPORT, a Croatian Tommy-branded plastic shopping bag, a Sprite soda can, a Studena water bottle, tissues, underwear, a plastic razor, and a thermal shirt with a tag reading AMUL body warmer 95cm. I photographed the objects with my digital camera. The photos

clearly show that the items have been there for quite some time. For example, one shoe was entirely covered in moss, metal packaging had faded, and the backpack and thermal shirt were partially buried under soil and fallen leaves, overgrown with surrounding vegetation. (Konjedic, fieldnotes, 9/7/2025)

The highlighted records and interlocutors' statements confirm that material traces of migration encompass a highly diverse arrangement of objects: from everyday items like clothing and footwear, various packaging, and personal hygiene products to documents and mobile phones. Comparing records from two temporally distinct field sites suggests that migration traces are not homogeneous constants but reflections of individual migratory routes across different periods. This becomes even more evident in the varied accounts of other researchers, who mention specific objects beyond those listed above – such as “*sajadah* (prayer rugs) and various prayer books” (Judžićska & Sendyka 2022, 21), and “life vests, rubber rings, and swim floats” (Jungfleisch 2025, 989). I thus posit that the nature of traces may be geographically conditioned while simultaneously dependent on numerous other factors, particularly political and legal ones like migration policies, visa regimes, and travellers' legal statuses.

As previously mentioned, people I spoke with who recently arrived in Trieste and its hinterland via the Balkan route most commonly described the traces using the English word – and in this case hypernym – “things”. In their descriptions, however, they spoke more specifically about objects such as a bag, backpack, clothes, phone, documents, water, and food. While interviewees who are local residents of the Trieste border municipalities of Trieste, San Dorligo della Valle and Monrupino most often used hypernyms in their accounts to describe material traces: *roba*, *štrace*, *škovace* (Eng. stuff, trash, junk). Such differences in naming suggest that material traces are not perceived neutrally, but through different perspectives and experiences. In order to understand the reasons for such naming, in the following chapter I present in detail how my research participants from the border villages of Trieste understand material traces of migration.

## ROBA, ŠTRACE, ŠKOVACE

SSKJ<sup>4</sup> lists the headword *róba* (Fran 2025a) under three distinct meanings according to the context of its use:

---

<sup>4</sup> SSKJ stands for *Slovar slovenskega knjižnega jezika*, meaning *Dictionary of the Standard Slovene*.

róba -e ž (ò)

1. colloq. *a product or crop intended for the market; goods*: the saleswoman praises her goods; cheap goods / the dress is made of good material *fabrics, clothes / haberdashery goods // product, yield in general*: we have produced a lot of this material; his shoes are foreign goods
2. colloq. *objects, things*: to distribute clothes, footwear and other stuff; he hid the stolen stuff in the attic
3. crafts, concerning dry goods *wooden products of home craft*: to make and sell dry goods; a basket of dry goods / Ribnica dry goods

Among interlocutors, the word *roba* is used in its second meaning as a general term for objects or things. At the same time the word is also a part of Italian vocabulary. In the Italian dictionary (Treccani 2025a), the word *la roba* has five different meanings, the first two being very close to the Slovenian second meaning.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the word was present among both Slovenian- and Italian-speaking interlocutors. They used it mainly as a hypernym when describing a large number of material traces in a certain area of the forest.

For instance, I spoke with an Italian-speaking respondent, when she led me to a larger dumping site of material traces deep inside the border forest. In 2023, I recorded a very similar dumping site during my fieldwork on the Socerb hill, of which I wrote that it represents various things “that migrants, refugees left behind before descending into the urban center” (Konjedic 2023). Upon arrival at the location, the interlocutor explained by the pile of collected objects that she had gathered them herself from the nearby forest area and “tidied them up” in one place. I was interested in her perspective on why people on the move leave behind such personal items. First, she pointed out that in her opinion “they don’t have our culture of throwing things in the trash can”<sup>6</sup> (Konjedic, fieldnotes, 11.7. 2025). As the starting point for her reflection, she recalled a personal experience of traveling through Nepal, where she noticed that there are often no organized waste disposal sites, so people are accustomed to discarding things anywhere. From this experience she concluded that people on the move also follow similar habits. How-

<sup>5</sup> Treccani dictionary refers to all material possessions of an individual under the first meaning of the word, while the second meaning refers more specifically to fabrics or textiles, as well as clothing and various everyday garments (Treccani 2025a).

<sup>6</sup> I quote in the original Italian, as expressed by the interlocutor: *Loro non hanno la nostra cultura di buttarle robe nell’immundizie* (Konjedic, fieldnotes, 11/7/2025).

ever, she stressed that she does not understand the abandoned material traces as an expression of disrespect, but rather as a consequence of differences in learned habits. She emphasized that this becomes particularly evident after several days of walking through forests, when fatigue and practical circumstances outweigh concern for keeping the space clean. Image 1 shows a dumping site of a larger number of material traces, which the interlocutor repeatedly described during the conversation with the word *roba*. She also explained that the objects were collected in a pile as part of a forest clean-up campaign, which was organized by the nearby village exclusively due to the villagers' desire to remove large quantities of material that was burdening and polluting the natural environment.



Image 1: Material traces of migration in the border forest of the Municipality of San Dorligo della Valle. Municipality of San Dorligo della Valle, 11 July, 2025.

Source: Hana Konjedic.

In contrast to the word *roba*, the words *štrace* and *škovace* do not have the same dictionary status. The word *štrace* is recorded in the singular form under the headword *štráca* (Fran 2025b), where it is marked as dialectal word. The dictionary does not list meanings, only the synonym *cunja*. The word *škovace* is not recorded in the SSKJ but appears in the online *Dictionary of Istrian Expressions* (Traven 2025), where it is translated as “trash”. Both terms thus belong to dialectal speech that falls out-

side the scope of standard Slovene. The words are derived from Italian, specifically the word *štraca* is a derivative of the verb *stracciare*, meaning “to tear up” (Treccani 2025b). While the word *škovaca* is derived from the Italian word *scovazza*, which is a slang word for rubbish in the Italian region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia (Slengo 2025). The locals consistently used the words *štrace* and *škovace* to describe material traces when expressing their views on the impact that, in their opinion, the presence of migrants has on forested areas. Their usage was embedded in a discourse in which, as Czerny writes, “migrants are often portrayed as a problem for the forests” (Czerny et al. 2022, 212).

During my visit to the Municipality of Monrupino, one of the locals stated that they recently cleaned up all traces from migrants. He continued that in their municipality they pay a lot of attention to this; they scare them off and do everything to prevent them from leaving traces in the forests (Konjedic, fieldnotes, 12/7/2025). When people on the move are framed within a discourse that claims their behaviour “disrupts both human and animal social life in the forests” (Czerny et al. 2022, 212), their presence starts to be seen as an ecological problem. This is evident not only in language but also in cleaning practices specifically aimed at removing their traces. A local from the Municipality of San Dorligo della Valle told me that before the COVID-19 pandemic the Municipality provided garbage bags and special containers in which villagers collected “migrant rubbish” picked up in the nearby forests. The interlocutor emphasised that these containers were “only for migrant trash” (interviewee from the Municipality of San Dorligo della Valle, interview, 11/7/2025). Although the village already had an established waste-separation system, the collected items did not fit the existing categories for separate collection. Instead, they were placed in a completely separate, locked container. This practice shows how even the discarded belongings of people on the move are constructed as “Other” and as incompatible with the waste of the local population. In the imagination of the Other, their objects – like the people themselves – are often situated in the realm of the foreign and the unwanted, something that can also be understood through the concept of “impurity” (see Douglas 2001 [1966]). The interviewee went on to say that the municipality later removed the container from the village to a waste-management centre.

The two clean-up campaigns described are not isolated cases. Many others have been carried out in the areas of the Municipalities of San Dorligo della Valle and Monrupino over the past three years. According to oral information obtained from the Provincial Forestry Board (it.

*Corpo Forestale Regionale*), in 2022 the municipality of San Dorligo della Valle organised a clean-up that collected roughly seventy bags of material. However, in 2023, 2024 and 2025, a non-governmental organisation called *MiTi associazione*<sup>7</sup> took over such clean-ups. This kind of initiatives, often organised by non-governmental organisations, “threaten to erase the material remnants of undocumented migration” (Jungfleisch 2025, 985), because once they are perceived as rubbish, they are systematically removed from the environment. Treating these objects as trash is “often part of anti-migrant discourses” (Hameršak & De León 2022, 243), whose loudest proponents are usually far-right groups (Czerny et al. 2022, 212). This view is not specific to the Trieste hinterland alone, but it is actually the dominant tone in discussions about the things migrants leave behind along migration routes worldwide. As early as 2015, Jason De León wrote about his study of material traces in the border zone between the USA and Mexico:

It’s part of a simplistic discourse which posits that these items are garbage with little cultural, historical, or scientific value. The general public often has difficulty grasping the idea that the things people throw away or leave behind today are the artifacts that archaeologists will study in the future. Although some of these items are refuse, many of the things border crossers drop in the desert are valued objects not meant to be left behind, such as pocket Bibles, family photos, and love letters. (De León 2015, 170)

Objects are therefore often removed during clean-up campaigns carried out by various organisations, and, as I described in the fieldnote excerpt in the previous chapter, they are also exposed to weathering that accelerates their decay and deterioration. For this very reason, both anthropology and archaeology avoid the blanket terms that label material traces of migration as trash. Such an understanding is part of a broader discourse of crimmigration that in the first place criminalises people on the move for unauthorised border crossings as well as for allegedly polluting natural landscapes. The discourse legitimises strict border regimes, even though this very control is “why migrants end up in natural environments in the first place” (Hameršak & Pleše 2021, 217).

---

<sup>7</sup> All cleaning campaigns are video-documented on their YouTube channel (MiTi Associazione 2023; 2024; 2025).

## CONCLUSION

In this paper I examined the emergence and significance of material traces of migration in the Trieste borderlands. Its main focus lies in highlighting the perspectives and different categorisations of my interlocutors of these traces, revealing the complex social, spatial, and symbolic dynamics of the researched area.

Material traces are not neutral. In the imagination of the Other, migrants' objects – like the people themselves – are often situated in the realm of the foreign and unwanted, a perception that can be understood through the lens of “impurity” (Douglas 2001 [1966]). Treating these objects as trash is frequently part of anti-migrant discourses, yet “the abandonment of clothing in the forest is a strategic practice that people on the move adopt in order to get rid of every sign that can connect them to the Game and that can suggest that they have, indeed, just arrived in Italy” (Bergasio 2025, 156). Consequently, the article highlights how objects carry layered meanings: they are evidence of movement, strategies of survival, and markers of broader social attitudes toward migration.

By focusing on materiality, the article offers a perspective on migration that complements approaches centered on legal frameworks, policy, or border practices, showing how the less visible aspects of irregularized border crossings become legible through objects. Material traces thus act as both indicators and carriers of information, offering insight into the often-clandestine dynamics of mobility. Although based on relatively small-scale research, the findings contribute to ongoing ethnographic discussions and may inform further scholarly investigation of material aspects of migration.

## References

- Altin, Roberta. 2021. “The Floating Karst Flow of Migrants as a Rite of Passage through the Eastern European Border.” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 26 (5): 589–607. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2021.1963560>
- Altin, Roberta. 2025. “Tracce e Rimozioni: Per un Archivio di Oggetti Abbandonati dai Migranti al Confine.” *Archivio Antropologico Mediterraneo* 27 (1): 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.4000/1450j>
- Bergasio, Noemi. 2025. “*What are we supposed to do while we are waiting?*”: vernacular geographies of the “Balkan Route” in Trieste, [Dissertation thesis], Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna. Dottorato di ricerca in Storie, culture e politiche del globale, 37 Ciclo. <https://doi.org/10.48676/unibo/amsdottorato/12068>

- Budič, Julija. 2024. "Klic na Policijo?" June 17, 2024. *e-ERIM: Mreža Pojmova Europskog Režima Iregulariziranih Migracija na Periferiji EU*. Accessed: September 13, 2025. <https://e-erim.ief.hr/pojam/p-klic-na-policijo-p.pdf?locale=hr>
- Budimir, Ivana, Barbara Kuna & Sara Pečić. 2023. "Ruksak." July 18, 2023. *e-ERIM: Mreža Pojmova Europskog Režima Iregulariziranih Migracija na Periferiji EU*. Accessed: September 5, 2025. <https://e-erim.ief.hr/pojam/p-ruksak-p.pdf?locale=hr>
- Czerny, Sarah, Marijana Hameršak, Iva Pleše & Sanja Bojanić. 2022. "Can the Forests Be Xenophobic? Migrant Pathways through Croatia and the Forest as Cover." In: *Sentient Ecologies: Xenophobic Imaginaries of Landscape*, Vol. 31, eds. Alexandra Coțofană and Hikmet Kuran, 211–228. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- De León, Jason. 2015. *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Douglas, Mary. 2001 [1966]. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- e-ERIM. 2026. "About." Accessed: March 3, 2026. <https://e-erim.ief.hr/o-e-erimu?locale=en>
- Fran. 2025a. "Róba." Accessed: August 31, 2025. <https://fran.si/iskanje?View=1&Query=roba>
- Fran. 2025b. "Štráca." Accessed: August 31, 2025. <https://fran.si/iskanje?Query=%C5%A1traca&IsAdvanced=True>
- Hameršak, Marijana. 2025. "Smrt." In *Balkanska Pot: Pojmovnik Evropskega Režima Iregulariziranih Migracij na Periferiji Evropske Unije*. Zupaničeva knjižnica 60, eds. Marijana Hameršak, Iva Pleše, Tea Škokić, Uršula Lipovec Čebren & Jelka Zorn, 193–204. Ljubljana: University of Ljubljana Press.
- Hameršak, Marijana, Sabine Hess, Marc Speer & Marta Stojić Mitrović. 2020. "The Forging of the Balkan Route: Contextualizing the Border Regime in the EU Periphery." *movements: Journal for Critical Migration and Border Regime Studies* 5 (1): 9–29.
- Hameršak, Marijana & Iva Pleše. 2021. "Forest, Forest, Forest. Sometimes We Sleep. Walking, Sleep, Walking, Sleep. It's Dangerous on This Way. Weaponized Migration Landscapes at the Outskirts of the European Union." *Etnološka Tribina* 51 (44): 204–221. <https://doi.org/10.15378/1848-9540.2021.44.11>
- Hameršak, Marijana & Jason De León. 2022. "Interview with Jason De León." *Etnološka Tribina* 45 (52): 238–249.
- Hameršak, Marijana & Bojan Mucko. 2025. "Pušbek." In *Balkanska Pot: Pojmovnik Evropskega Režima Iregulariziranih Migracij na Periferiji Evrop-*

*ske Unije*. Zupaničeva knjižnica 60, eds. Marijana Hameršak, Iva Pleše, Tea Škokić, Uršula Lipovec Čebtron & Jelka Zorn, 159–170. Ljubljana: University of Ljubljana Press.

- Hameršak, Marijana, Bojan Mucko, Mojca Piškori & Iva Pleše. 2025. "Zemljevid Etnografskega Raziskovanja (2020–2024), Balkanska Ruta: Iregularizirane Migracije na Periferiji EU." Translated by Asja Hrvatini and Juraj Šutej. Zagreb: ERIM / Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku.
- Jovanović Horvat, Valentin. 2024. "Gestapo Mreža." June 17, 2024. *e-ERIM: Mreža Pojmova Europskog Režima Iregulariziranih Migracija na Periferiji EU*. Accessed: August 24, 2025. <https://e-erim.ief.hr/pojam/p-gestapo-mreza-p.pdf?locale=hr>
- Judzińska, Natalia & Roma Sendyka. 2022. "The Crisis at the Polish-Belarusian Border. Sites and Things." *Sprawy Narodowościowe: Seria Nowa* 54: 1–35. 1–35. <https://doi.org/10.11649/sn.2845>
- Jungfleisch, Johannes. 2025. "From Transient Traces to Material Witnesses: An Archaeological Investigation of Contemporary Border Crossings in the Eastern Mediterranean." *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 29: 978–999. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10761-025-00777-7>
- Kimball, Jill. 2020. "In Croatia, Brown Archaeologist Traces Generations-Old Refugee Route." January 6, 2020. *Brown University: News from Brown*. Accessed: August 27, 2025. <https://www.brown.edu/news/2020-01-06/coelho>
- Konjedic, Hana. 2023. "Sledi v Gozdu." *e-ERIM: Mreža Pojmova Europskog Režima Iregulariziranih Migracija na Periferiji EU*. Accessed: August 25, 2025. <https://e-erim.ief.hr/pojam/p-sledi-v-gozdu-p?locale=hr>
- Lampič, Barbara. 2017. "Strokovna Podpora Fokusnim Skupinam v Sklopu Priprave Strategije Prostorskega Razvoja Slovenije 2050. Sklop 4, Gorska in Obmejna Območja: Zaključno Poročilo." Ljubljana: Department of Geography, Faculty of Arts.
- Lipovec Čebtron, Uršula, Tina Ivnik & Eva Fekonja. 2019. "Migracije in Gostoljubje: Kriminalizacija Gostoljubja v Veliki Kladuši." *Časopis za Kritiko Znanosti* 47 (278): 135–161.
- MiTi Associazione. 2023. "MiTi: Pulizia del Monte Carso con le Nuove Attrezzature. Dicembre 2023." Accessed: August 31, 2025. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=curgC7Tqf0w&ab\\_channel=MiTiasociazione](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=curgC7Tqf0w&ab_channel=MiTiasociazione)
- MiTi Associazione. 2024. "MiTi con gli Scout di Milano CNGEI Pulizia del Monte Carso." Accessed: August 31, 2025. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNL42AFuQRA&ab\\_channel=MiTiasociazione](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNL42AFuQRA&ab_channel=MiTiasociazione)
- MiTi Associazione. 2025. "2025 Carso Pulito: PULIZIA Assieme a 70 Volontari di Varie Associazioni anche dal Veneto." Accessed: August 31, 2025. <https://>

- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_rh9QQVcs0&t=16s&ab\\_channel=MiTiaassociazione](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_rh9QQVcs0&t=16s&ab_channel=MiTiaassociazione)
- Mucko, Bojan, Iva Pleše & Tea Škokić. 2025. "Gejm." In: *Balkanska Pot: Pojmovnik Evropskega Režima Iregulariziranih Migracij na Periferiji Evropske Unije*, eds. Marijana Hameršak Iva Pleše, Tea Škokić, Uršula Lipovec Čebrown & Jelka Zorn, 59–70. Ljubljana: University of Ljubljana Press.
- Nared, Dagmar. 2022. "Fototesnoba." August 16, 2022. *e-ERIM: Mreža Pojmova Evropskog Režima Iregulariziranih Migracija na Periferiji EU*. Accessed: September 14, 2025. <https://e-erim.ief.hr/pojam/p-fototesnoba-p?locale=hr>
- Pleše, Iva & Marijana Hameršak. 2022. "Naoružani Krajolik." March 1, 2022. *e-ERIM: Mreža Pojmova Evropskog Režima Iregulariziranih Migracija na Periferiji EU*. Accessed: August 26, 2025. <https://e-erim.ief.hr/pojam/suma-kao-naoruzani-migrantski-krajolik?locale=en>
- Prinčič, Špela. 2024. "Vlamljanje, Kurjenje v Objektih, Pušcanje Odpadkov." June 17, 2024. *e-ERIM: Mreža Pojmova Evropskog Režima Iregulariziranih Migracija na Periferiji EU*. Accessed: August 29, 2025. <https://e-erim.ief.hr/pojam/p-vlamljanje-kurjenje-v-objektih-puscanje-odpadkov-p.pdf?locale=hr>
- Seitsonen, Oula Ilari, Vesa-Pekka Herva & Mika Kunnari. 2017. "Abandoned Refugee Vehicles 'In the Middle of Nowhere': Reflections on the Global Refugee Crisis from the Northern Margins of Europe." *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* 3 (2): 244–260. <https://doi.org/10.1558/jca.31697>
- Slengo. 2025. "Scovazza." Accessed: September 18, 2025. <https://slengo.it/define/scovazza>
- Traven. 2025. "Škovace." Accessed: September 18, 2025. [https://traven.si/index.php?option=com\\_seoglossary&view=glossary&catid=1&id=538&Itemid=0](https://traven.si/index.php?option=com_seoglossary&view=glossary&catid=1&id=538&Itemid=0)
- Treccani. 2025a. "Ròba." Accessed August 31, 2025. <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/roba/>
- Treccani. 2025b. "Stracciare." Accessed: September 18, 2025. <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ricerca/stracciare/?search=stracciare>
- Volpicelli, Stefano. 2018. "Counteracting the Witch Hunt in Managing the Reception of People Seeking Protection. The "Trieste Model"!" *OSCE Yearbook* 24: 251–264.

Примљено/Received: 16. 12. 2025.

Прихваћено/Accepted: 22. 04. 2026.