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## Waiting for the Visa: Temporality, Emotions, and Researcher Positionality beyond Schengen

This article analyses, through an autoethnographic approach, the mismatch between visa procedure timeframes and research rhythms. It draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and uses selected literature and fieldnotes to show how the uncertainties and delays inherent in visa procedures intersected with the emotional and embodied experience of conducting research beyond the Schengen area.

The article foregrounds the visa system as a key mechanism through which global inequalities in mobility are produced. This argument is situated within the context of the Balkan route, where policy shifts illustrate how migrants' mobility has been restricted and governed. By contrast, as a European researcher, my own mobility is seldom structurally impeded; yet, the bureaucratic timeline of the volunteer visa procedure shaped how I accessed and inhabited the field.

The autoethnographic account of the visa process traces how bureaucratic itineraries – through clinics, administrative offices, and insurance agencies – generated frictions, vulnerabilities, and alliances with local “guides”. The conclusion discusses the analytical value of this process, arguing that the bureaucratic route of the visa became a constitutive element of the research, shaping my map of the city and granting access to places that would otherwise have remained inaccessible.

*Keywords:* visa, autoethnography, emotions, Sarajevo, Balkan route, solidarity

## Чекајући визу: темпоралност, емоције и позиционалност истраживача изван шенгенског простора

Овај чланак анализира, кроз аутоетнографски приступ, несагласје између временских оквира визне процедуре и ритмова истраживања. Заснива се на етнографском теренском раду спроведеном у Сарајеву (Босна и Херцеговина) и користи одабрану литературу и теренске белешке како би показао на који начин неизвесности и кашњења, својствена визном поступку, утичу на емотивно и отелотворено искуство истраживања изван шенгенског простора.

Чланак истиче визни систем као кључни механизам кроз који се производе глобалне неједнакости у мобилности. Овај аргумент је смештен у контекст Балканске руте, где промене у политикама илуструју како је мобилност миграната ограничавана и регулисана. Насупрот томе, као европском истраживачу, моја сопствена мобилност ретко је структурно ограничена; ипак, бирократска хронолошка линија поступка за волонтерску визу обликовала је начин на који сам приступио и обитавао на терену.

Аутоетнографски приказ процеса добијања визе прати како су бирократске путање – кроз клинике, административне канцеларије и осигуравајуће агенције – стварале трења, рањивости и савезништва са локалним “водичима”. Закључак разматра аналитичку вредност овог процеса, тврдећи да је бирократска рута визе постала конститутивни елемент истраживања, обликујући моју мапу града и омогућавајући приступ местима која би иначе остала недоступна.

*Кључне речи:* виза, аутоетнографија, емоције, Сарајево, Балканска рута, солидарност

### INTRODUCTION

This article draws on selected scholarly literature, interviews, and the researcher's ethnographic field journal to examine the bureaucracy of visa procedures from an autoethnographic and methodological perspective. The temporality of the visa application process intersects with the emotional dimension of conducting sustained and engaged fieldwork. The article asks how the bureaucratic process of obtaining a visa shaped the fieldwork – influencing its temporality, the relationships that emerged, and the researcher's access to and positionality within

the field site. In doing so, the contribution engages with the literature on emotions, ethnography, and the anthropology of bureaucracy by arguing that visa procedures should not be understood merely as administrative obstacles but as elements that actively structure the conditions under which the research takes place. Unlike other forms of waiting that ethnographers may encounter incidentally, the visa process directly conditions the possibility of remaining in the field, thereby shaping the researcher's position, role, and legitimacy within the ethnographic setting.

This contribution takes the "visa" as its central keyword. Before turning to the methodological and positionality-related issues at stake, it is important to clarify from the outset that visa regimes function primarily as mechanisms for controlling mobility and producing inequalities on a global scale. For this reason, prior to addressing the methodological challenges related to the possibility of conducting continuous fieldwork in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the first section of the article presents a selection of literature that has critically examined the bureaucratic infrastructures governing human mobility, exposing the inequalities these systems reproduce. The visa regime is situated within the broader developments of the Balkan route and the control functions implemented by the states traversed by migratory trajectories since the "long summer of migration" in 2015 (Kasperek & Speer 2015).

The second section positions this contribution methodologically within autoethnographic debates and geographically beyond the borders of the Schengen Area. The temporal disjunction underlying this work stems from negotiating access to the field and determining whether it would be possible to stay longer than three months as a volunteer within a local NGO in Sarajevo, an organisation that supports migrants through the distribution of non-food items (NFIs). This section clarifies the choice to locate the research in Sarajevo and engages with debates on autoethnography and the role of emotions in fieldwork.

The third section draws on excerpts from the ethnographic journal to examine the visa application process as both an opportunity and a source of contrasting emotions. The process led me to different sites such as medical clinics, the Service for Foreigners' Affairs, insurance offices, among others. My "guides" through these bureaucratic landscapes were local actors who dedicated time and energy to facilitating the procedure.

The conclusion brings together the threads of this bureaucratic experience, highlighting its analytical and ethnographic significance. It also

traces how navigating the visa procedure created opportunities to forge strong connections with actors in the field and to access spaces that would otherwise have remained inaccessible or unfamiliar. Within the uncertainties and frictions generated by this process, the state apparatus emerges not only as an object of study, but also as a force that shapes the possibilities of ethnographic research.

## VISA AS METHOD

Understanding the conditions that shape people's possibilities for movement across the world requires engaging with the role of visas and passports. A long tradition of scholarship has examined the inequalities embedded in these documents, linking them to the formation of the nation-state. Torpey analyses the history through which the state "monopolized the legitimate means of movement" (Torpey 1998, 13). According to the author:

The creation of the modern passport system and the use of similar systems in the interior of a variety of countries – the product of centuries-long labors of slow, painstaking bureaucratic construction – thus signaled the dawn of a new era in human affairs, in which individual states and the international state system as a whole successfully monopolized the authority to permit movement within and across their jurisdictions. (Torpey 1998, 4)

The development of passports and visas is intertwined with the proliferation of borders and their displacement from the cartographic line delimiting States' territory: "The visa regime allows for a delocalization of the border function so that states may engage in sorting behavior away from the physical limit of the state" (Salter 2006, 175). This delocalisation is re-territorialised within embassies, consulates, and state offices responsible for issuing visas and passports. Infantino shows how, in these places and through these documents, the filtering action of the border takes shape: "in which populations are categorized according to a specific logic, namely, the proactive management of risk, at a distance, before actual arrival on the territory" (Infantino 2024, 314). In this reading, Bigo's analysis of the "external dimension of internal security" strongly resonates. The (in)securitisation of the migration discourse has shaped the EU border regime and, in recent years, the EU accession process:

Far from a “war on migrants”, the system of justification is elaborated from the idea of protecting migrants against the criminals who exploit them as well as building more generally on the importance of being prepared against all sorts of “uncertainties”. (Bigo 2014, 213)

However, this categorisation of migrants as unwanted travellers and as bearers of risk for Global North countries is challenged by the practices of illegalised migrants themselves. A strand of critical border and migration scholarship has analysed the informal (re)production of passports, arguing that such practices become part of the tactic’s migrants employ to access faster forms of mobility – such as air travel – otherwise denied to them. These approaches highlight how: “borders become sites of contestation over the authority of knowledge, in a material, visual, and technical fashion” (Keshavarz 2024, 1157).

For Mathias Czaika and colleagues this risk-based categorisation between desirable travelers and possible visa overstayers does not fit into “simplistic North-South schemes and that visa regimes may partly reflect more complex geopolitical relations and multi-layered hierarchies at the regional level” (Czaika, De Haas & Villares-Varela 2018, 590). While outlining a substantial system of profound inequalities in the possibilities of movement between populations of the Global North and South, this reading adds complexity to the role of the visa, introducing a geopolitical element and the impact of bilateral agreements between states. To provide just one example, this regional and multi-level reconfiguration of mobility becomes particularly evident in Serbia’s decision to revoke visa-free travel for citizens of Tunisia and Burundi in November 2022 (Dragojlo 2022). This policy change occurred within the EU accession process and followed the concerns raised by the Union’s authorities: “Serbia took no steps to align with the EU’s list of visa required third countries, in particular with those third countries which present irregular migration or security risks to the EU” (EU Commission 2022, 8–9). The case of Serbia illustrates how, in countries along the Balkan route, the EU accession process intersects with migration control policies. Placing this dynamic in historical perspective, Hameršak and colleagues recall:

The control of unwanted movements toward the EU was a priority of the EU accession process of the Western Balkan states from the very beginning. It started with controlling the movement of their own nationals (to allow the states to be removed from the so-called Black Schengen list) during the visa facilitation process. (...) Gradually, the focus

of movement control shifted to third-country nationals. (Hameršak et al. 2020, 18)

Within this framework, starting from the 2015 “long summer of migration” (Kasperek & Speer 2015), media attention shifted from the coasts of Lampedusa and the Mediterranean toward the villages and cities spanning from Greece to Austria and Germany. In those summer months almost one million people arrived in Greece and from there, passing through the Balkans, were heading mainly to Austria, Germany and Sweden (Beznec & Kurnik 2020, 35). Even if the Balkan route did not start in those months, during the summer of 2015 it re-emerged from the “shadows and invisibility” (Hess & Kasperek 2022). These “disobedient mass mobilities” (Tazzioli & De Genova 2016) had the ability to disrupt the European border regime for a few months. In response to this, countries crossed by migrants’ trajectories opted for a “state-organized transit of people” (Hameršak et al. 2020, 9) within a formalised and official corridor, which: “enabled refugees to cross the Balkans from northern Greece to Western Europe within two or three days, in special trains and buses (often even free of charge)” (Beznec, Speer & Stojić Mitrović 2016, 4). Subsequently, the “re-stabilization” (Hess & Kasperek 2017) of the border regime in the EU – following the “EU-Turkey Statement and Action Plan” signed in March 2016 (European Parliament 2019) – opened a new phase in the way that the irregularised mobility along the route has been governed. In those months, a massive solidarity mobilisation of local and international actors formed to support migrants during their journeys and periods of waiting along the Balkan route (Milan 2019; Hameršak 2021; Cantat 2021; Helms 2023).

The present research is situated within the longer trajectory of these solidaristic practices. This article therefore engages with the literature on solidarity studies (Giliberti & Potot 2021; see also Amigoni, Ghaffari & Jano 2025), while primarily offering a methodological contribution. It forms part of a broader research project that takes solidarity as a key analytical lens for understanding the dynamics shaping different urban centres along the Balkan route. In terms of positionality, the methodology includes the decision to practice solidarity with local actors as a prerequisite for writing about solidarity, reflecting Emerson, Fretz and Shaw’s (1995, 19) observation on the interdependence between “doing” and “writing” in ethnographic research. Within this research design, access to the field – negotiated with the NGO that hosted me – was planned to unfold over approximately seven months.

In addition, my research builds on previous experiences of working in support of asylum seekers, as asylum caseworker,<sup>1</sup> in my hometown in Italy. From the beginning of 2018 until the end of 2020, I regularly accompanied newcomers and asylum seekers through the bureaucratic and administrative procedures required to formalise their asylum applications, renew residence permits, or request new ones. With this background, this article represents a reversal of perspective compared to my past work supporting asylum seekers: this time, in Sarajevo, it was I who was accompanied and supported. For the first time, I found myself dealing with a bureaucracy operating in a new language, of which my superficial knowledge was certainly not sufficient to understand it, thus placing total trust in the people who guided and facilitated me through this process.

## AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OUTSIDE SCHENGENLAND

This article is situated in Sarajevo, a “crossroads” (Queirolo Palmas & Rahola 2020) of the Bosnian section of the route. This capital was identified as research site given its peripherality in existing analyses of the migration processes shaping the route. Danijela (a pseudonym), a research participant with long-standing experience in supporting migrants in the city, clearly highlighted the role of the Bosnian capital during our interview:

I think that Sarajevo was always underestimated in this whole situation, because Sarajevo, from the beginning – from 2018 – served as a main transit point. So, for wherever people were arriving – whether it is from Serbia, Montenegro, whatever – they will first come to Sarajevo. They will stay in Sarajevo few days, sometime even few months, depending on the situation. (Danijela)

From late 2017 onwards, Bosnia became part of the Balkan route, and Sarajevo emerged as a site of encounters and solidarity, where migrants in transit – or waiting – forged alliances with local and international ac-

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<sup>1</sup> In Italy, asylum caseworkers (*operatori/operatrici legali*) work across both first- and second-stage reception, supporting asylum seekers and individuals who have been granted a residence permit throughout the bureaucratic procedures associated with these processes. They work in coordination with cultural mediators, lawyers, and the wider network surrounding the asylum seeker. The core of their work consists in informing individuals of their rights, preparing them for the Territorial Commission interview, and assisting lawyers in the event of an appeal. It is a role that balances knowledge of the national legal system with geopolitical and anthropological understandings of the countries of origin of asylum applicants.

tors within “urban solidarity spaces” (Arampatzi 2017). During an ethnographic visit to the city in May 2025, together with Luca Giliberti,<sup>2</sup> we recorded in our field journal an episode that took place inside a local NGO:

A small group of Moroccan youngsters – after sharing with us the trajectories they had undertaken, the cities they had passed through, and the ways in which they chose to travel – explained that they had been in the city for three days and that this NGO is the first place of solidarity they had encountered on their journey, the first place where they were welcomed with a smile. This statement – an attestation to the atmosphere of openness perceptible, at least in a city such as Sarajevo – brings to mind the many conversations I have had with migrants within local associations during my fieldwork. When asked “How do you find Bosnia?” their response was often a succinct yet telling: “Bosnia is good!” (Excerpt from the field journal, May 2025, Sarajevo)

As a preliminary step in my broader doctoral research project, this article lays the foundation for developing a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995), “in place” (Lindquist 2009; Salazar, Elliot & Norum 2017), outside and inside of “Schengenland” (Walters 2002).<sup>3</sup> Within this framework, I adopted an autoethnographic approach, which “composes the subjective autobiographical instances of the author, their vulnerability, in order to deepen the embodied understanding of the social and cultural context in which those experiences took place” (Gariglio 2017, 493).<sup>4</sup> This choice is closely aligned with the focus of the present contribution, reflecting the pivotal role that the bureaucratic process of obtaining a visa played in shaping the roles I assumed and the positionalities I navigated during fieldwork. The text is assembled from memory and field notes collected during my stay in Sarajevo between October 2023 and May 2024. Autoethnography, in this perspective, invites us to begin precisely from memory,

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<sup>2</sup> Luca Giliberti is an Associate Professor in the disciplinary field of Sociology of Cultural and Communication Processes at the University of Parma. His main research areas focus on transnational migrations, borders, and educational processes. Only the field journal for May 2025 is shared between the author of this article and Professor Luca Giliberti.

<sup>3</sup> The research is multi-sited, as in addition to the period of voluntary work carried out in Sarajevo (October 2023 – May 2024), fieldwork continued in Zagreb (June – November 2024).

<sup>4</sup> Quotations from Italian editions have been translated into English by the author of this article.

in order to “understand and critically reconstruct our experiences of the past” (Gariglio 2023, 117). The recollection and reflexive narrative writing of events are here proposed as part of the response to the questions: “How useful is the story?” and “To what uses might the story be put?” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011, 282). A first answer is that the interest and mobilisation that the Balkan route has generated make the questions of how one chooses to operate in the field worthy of being discussed, analysed, and further explored. Indeed, given the considerable academic – and also activist and volunteer – interest that, since the summer of 2015, the region has generated, recounting and analysing the process of obtaining a visa can prove useful for all those who, in various capacities, intend to undertake a period of support along the segments of the route that lie outside the Schengen Area. It is important to stress that the narrative takes into account the fact that the author is an Italian national, male, and white, holding a passport ranked among the top three worldwide in terms of granting the privilege of unobstructed mobility (Passport Index, n.d.). The privilege of travelling and applying for visas with such a powerful passport defines the very possibility of attempting to negotiate my presence with the host state’s authorities. Yet this structural certainty collided with the everyday temporality of fieldwork and with the expectation of completing a defined research period with specific objectives. These unanticipated uncertainties opened access to sites of Bosnian institutions that would otherwise have remained peripheral to my research.

However, within these bureaucratic encounters the waiting for a response, the inscrutability of the procedure, and the involvement of facilitators highlights how this process was not free from frictions and personal investments – both on the part of the author and of those who became involved in providing assistance and producing the necessary documentation to obtain the visa. The bureaucratic apparatus has its own temporality, which it imposes on the person submitting requests: “The waiting imposed before being received, as well as in the handling of paperwork and the payment of checks, concretely manifests the power of the institution and the weakness of those who depend on it” (Dubois 2018, 88).

The visa procedure, together with the bureaucratic encounters that defined its unfolding, necessarily becomes part of the analysis of the researcher’s stay in the field – as one of those “raw moments” in which “emplacement within the field impinges upon subjectivity and allows for an unmediated perception of something that cannot be called up but that manifests itself as a presence” (Hastrup 2010, 206). A raw moment that,

sometimes, takes on the characteristics of the “mini-drama” as framed by Crapanzano:

The mini-dramas of fieldwork are pragmatically and, more important, meta-pragmatically constitutive. In their particularity, in the absence of fixed conventions, in the struggle to establish such conventions, to permit meaningful communication and yet to preserve the uniqueness of the ethnographic encounter, these mini-dramas are disturbing insofar as they challenge the taken-for-granted and its naturalization. (Crapanzano 2010, 76)

Thus, the procedure of obtaining the visa becomes one of these “raw moments” that takes shape as a “mini-drama”, and giving space to the emotions generated by the long visa process fully falls within the body of literature that has brought the intersubjective dimension back to the center of ethnographic research (Moser 2008; Davies 2010; Davies & Stodulka 2019).

From this perspective, the visa procedure becomes an ethnographic episode of the fieldwork itself, entering into dialogue with anthropological literature that has reflected on emotions from a methodological and reflexive standpoint. James Davies, in his contribution on emotions in research, highlights how in ethnographic methodological debate – despite significant developments concerning the researcher’s positionality in the field – “it left comparatively under-investigated the researcher’s states of being during fieldwork and how these states may either enable or inhibit the understanding that fieldwork aims to generate” (Davies 2010, 1). The centrality of emotions within a methodology that requires the researcher’s physical presence in the field is thus foregrounded, starting from the awareness that “all that emotions do (and can do) should be considered directly relevant to ethnographic fieldwork practice” (Davies & Stodulka 2019, 6). In this regard, examining the bureaucratic encounter as an emotional, embodied experience enables a deeper understanding of the ways in which presence, waiting, and uncertainty inform the ethnographic process itself. This article discusses a key prerequisite for gaining access to the research site and for constructing the role of volunteer within this space, shaping the position through which I entered and was recognised by others. Granting such centrality to these roles resonates with Fava’s observation:

The events leading to access to the field (...) are part of the investigation, and it is precisely through these that the character with whom the

researcher, often unknowingly at first, enters the fieldwork is defined, even though their position may change or can change over time. (Fava 2017, 63)

Remaining in the field required securing the documentation necessary to reside for more than three consecutive months in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The visa I applied for and ultimately received was for voluntary work, which constituted one of the two roles I undertook during my fieldwork. As aptly outlined by Jordan and Moser the importance of the volunteer role is crucial in gaining legitimacy “and in undermining potential suspicion, fear, and conspicuousness as an outsider without any productive or culturally definable role” (Jordan & Moser 2020, 569). This process, far from being a mere administrative formality, entangles the temporalities of bureaucracy with those of ethnographic research. In this sense, the role (volunteer) and the bureaucratic artefact (the visa) that delineated its contours overlapped, highlighting the emotional and practical investment required to assume a specific position within the research field through engagement with a local bureaucratic apparatus.

As Hoag claims, “key aspect of bureaucracies is their ability to make clients wait”, conceptualising bureaucracy as a “hope-generating machine” (Hoag 2011, 86). In this encounter, “Rather than producing a certain rationality and coherence, the bureaucratic machine generates enjoyments, pleasures, fears and expectations” (Hoag 2011, 86), shaping the emotional landscape of the fieldwork.

## THE BUREAUCRATIC ROUTE OF THE VOLUNTEER VISA

The process of obtaining the volunteer visa was marked by prolonged waiting, shaped by the slow pace of the Bosnian bureaucratic apparatus. The expanded temporalities of the procedure became entangled with the compressed timeframe of the doctoral research, producing a disjunction that, at some point, cast doubt on the very possibility of residing in Bosnia for more than three consecutive months. This temporal mismatch reflects how bureaucracy actively shapes the conditions of knowledge production while also regulating mobility. This waiting, which lasted throughout my entire stay in Sarajevo, brought me into places I would not otherwise have accessed: medical clinics, insurance offices, and the building of the Service for Foreigners' Affairs (SFA), providing a tangible example of the workings of the Bosnian bureaucratic apparatus. The procedure for obtaining the volunteer visa required the presentation of seventeen documents. Some of these had to be provided by the NGO and others by

me. The process began in Italy, well before departure, including accessing court records, requesting copies of my criminal record and pending charges, which were later translated into Bosnian. Once in Sarajevo, the first document I needed was the so-called “white card”, the registration of my address. The SFA is responsible for these procedures, and the institution is housed in a building located across the street from Sarajevo airport. I first entered the SFA lobby in early November 2023:

The building rises as an imposing glass palace, reflecting the comings and goings of planes at the nearby Sarajevo airport. I am immediately struck by the space that opens up before me. On the ground floor are the various desks where one interacts with officials to acquire different documents. Immediately to the right is an office where residences are registered, and beyond that, the space opens into a hallway leading to offices not accessible to the public. On the left are the reception area and another desk where fingerprints are taken. What stands out to me is the sparse row of chairs along the wall and the silence that characterises this place. The few people present speak in low voices, and the scene is marked by a sense of calm and stillness. (Excerpt from the field journal, November 2023, Sarajevo)

The quietness of the office – marked by the absence of loud noises, arguments, sighs, and raised voices typically triggered by the frustrations of bureaucratic machinery – stood in stark contrast to the anxiety produced by knowing that my ability to continue the research, as well as to honour the commitments made with the hosting NGO, depended entirely on the Bosnian administration’s approval of my application. From the moment I first entered the hall, I was immediately aware of how calm the office was, especially when compared to the chaotic atmosphere of the immigration offices I have seen in Italy in my past work as an asylum caseworker. Only a dozen seats hinted at the modest daily flow of visitors. I mentally compared the SFA hall to the immigration office in the city where I worked, which, despite having half the residents of Sarajevo, operated with nine desks for processing the various immigration-related paperwork (study visas, work visas, asylum applications, etc.) and a constant flow of people from opening to closing time, not comparable to the placid situation I found in the Bosnian capital. By listening to conversations in English between officers and visitors, I realised that several were there for marriage and family matters: marrying a spouse or a husband from abroad or declaring a relative’s move to Bosnia. The quietness of the office ma-

terialised Sarajevo's peripheral position within transnational flows of investments, student exchanges, high and low skilled workers, alongside the near absence of asylum seekers.

After this first access, I returned to this office again in December 2023, and then January, February and April 2024. My landlady and the staff of the NGO hosting me, helped me to navigate the Bosnian bureaucracy. In this context, I allowed myself to be guided by the locals, adopting a position that reversed my previous professional role – shifting from assisting others to being guided in turn. Within a single morning, the “white card” was issued, with no expiration date, enabling me to begin the volunteer visa application. From the day I entered the country, I had 90 days to apply for a volunteer visa, this time with the support of the staff of the NGO hosting me.

In mid-December 2023, the NGO staff informed me: “Now they also want the blood test.” In those wintery days, the city was shrouded in a thick layer of smog, with pollution levels often ranking among the worst in the world. Over the years, news outlets reported Sarajevo as the most polluted city in the world, or at least among the top four, alternating for the top spot with Delhi, Lahore and Dhaka (Sarajevo Times 2022). The pollution layer surrounding the city was mainly due to the use of coal and wood to heat private apartments. On the streets the air carried a pungent smell. City authorities issued bulletins intimating children and the elderly to limit outdoor activities. On the worst days, public events were canceled, and during morning hours, even flights neither landed nor departed. Pharmacies ran out of masks. The layer of pollution only thinned in the early afternoon hours, then thickened again toward evening. Some friends told me that when the fog gets this thick, they usually refer to Sarajevo as “Mordor”:

We meet at the association with the staff member who is accompanying me through the bureaucratic procedure, and from there we set out into Sarajevo-Mordor to collect the missing documents I need to submit to the relevant offices. This morning, the city is wrapped in dense, pungent-smelling fog. We move partly on foot, and at times by taxi or tram. First, we go to a private clinic in the Grbavica neighbourhood for the blood test. My guide tells me that this was one of the first private clinics in the city, opened shortly after the end of the siege and at the beginning of the country's privatisation of public services. The blood test required for the visa procedure must include an HIV test as well as my own medical history and that of my close family members. I won-

der to myself whether all this information is really necessary to assess my eligibility for a volunteer visa. (Excerpt from the field journal, December 2023, Sarajevo)

As mentioned earlier, the list of required documents was long, and we tried to gather as many as possible in a single day. This early entanglement with administrative scrutiny constitutes what Hastrup (2010) describes as a “raw moment”, signaling how the visa apparatus extends into the personal and intimate dimensions of applicants’ lives – an intrusion that is not cognitive, but felt physically and affectively. Moreover, moving from one office to another, the bureaucratic errands shaped my own map of the city. Each document corresponded to a place, each signature to an encounter. Through these journeys around the city of Sarajevo, I was slowly granted access not only to administrative offices, but also to fragments of everyday life otherwise invisible to an outsider. As the day unfolded:

After the medical check-ups, we cross Grbavica and then, walking along the Miljacka river, we reach Hrasno for other documents. We end our journey in the university area. The long morning becomes a moment of discovery of the city, both architecturally and historically, through the stories of my “guide”. In addition to offering the opportunity to explore different neighbors of Sarajevo, it is also a moment for me to share some research ideas that have emerged during these weeks. On these occasions, as we talk and build familiarity, I shift from the role of volunteer to that of researcher, keeping those I have identified as key informants updated on the direction the research is taking. At the same time, however, I cannot deny a certain tension regarding the procedure we are about to undertake: what if my visa is not granted? This question gets stuck in my mind; I try to push the thought away, but I believe it will stay with me for quite some time. (Excerpt from the field journal, December 2023, Sarajevo)

This episode exemplifies how the time spent gathering documents and completing the visa procedure also became moments deeply significant for the research. The people around me were curious about the work I was doing, and during these moments – freed from the day-to-day tasks at the NGO – a feedback loop could emerge around the key themes of my study.

In late December 2023 I was ready to deliver the documentation to the relevant office. That morning, I went accompanied to the SFA. I had to fill out some forms and got fingerprinted. I handed over the documenta-

tion and waited in the hall. As often happens with paperwork, some were missing and the officer gave me 30 days to supplement. In early January 2024, after submitting the missing papers, I received a 60-day temporary permit to stay, allowing me to enter and leave the country. I was told that within the 60-day time frame I would be contacted with an update on the status of the procedure, and informed whether it would be approved or rejected. My stay in the country was justified by the “voluntary work” visa application. Towards the end of February, I recorded this episode in my ethnographic journal:

A hot, sunny day. At 10 a.m., I head to the SFA to try to renew the certificate that allows me to stay in the country for 60 days. It expires end of February. We’ve waited until the last days for a response over the final permit to stay, but it hasn’t come, so I’ll be applying for an extension. Yesterday, a colleague in the NGO called, and after being told, somewhat irritably, that “Italians don’t need a visa”, the official listened to her and reconsidered his position. He told her to send me in the next day for the renewal.

The next day, the waiting room of the SFA is quiet. This is the fourth time I’ve entered this hall in four months. I am never truly comfortable here, as though my work in Bosnia could be scrutinised and become a subject of curiosity for the country’s institutions. I approach the information desk and hand my passport and certificate to the official, using the few words I know in Bosnian. She takes both and hands them to a colleague. She asks me to sit and wait. I comply.

After five minutes, an official enters the main hall where I’m waiting, stamps a new document, and hands me back my forms and passport. I now have a new permit for another 60 days. She tells me my request has been approved but that they are still waiting for the time to print the sticker for my passport. She doesn’t know when it will be ready. She reassures me that if another 60 days pass, I can still apply for another extension. Great. I’m wondering how long it’ll take for the sticker to be printed. As soon as I step outside the building, I notice that in the new document, the reason for the visa – voluntary work – has been replaced with the Bosnian word: obrazovanje. Seeing a different word that has nothing to do with volunteering, I checked it on Google Translate and found out that it refers to education. I went back inside. The official at the information desk looks at the two papers she had just given me, takes them, enters an office, and comes out saying, “Ok ok!”, without further explanations. Perfect. All good. I feel reassured

that the procedure will go as it should. (Excerpt from the field journal, February 2024, Sarajevo)

However, this new wording added to the inscrutability of bureaucratic procedure. Recalling Hoag's (2011) argument, each step in the process is characterised by a mixture of emotions. As in this case, a step forward in obtaining the visa entails the introduction of a new term, which in turn places the applicant in the position of having to ensure that they are still on the correct path. Within this prolonged uncertainty surrounding the authorities' response, the "mini-drama" described by Crapanzano (2010) takes shape, encapsulating the affective tensions embedded in the visa application process. Drawing from Dubois (2018) the power of the institution materialises through a process marked by the submission of documents, requests for additional paperwork, the printing and signing of forms, and by gradually becoming familiar with a new language: that of the institution.

Two more months went by, and a week into the expiration of the permit, I showed up at the SFA building, again. I am told that my visa will be delivered, but I had to wait a few more days:

I feel relieved to see the procedure finally coming to an end. Its conclusion coincides with the end of my fieldwork: in just a few days I will be leaving to return to Italy. The awareness that the visa has been granted brings me great ease; as the stress tied to the administration's response fades, I sense that my perception of this space begins to change. The officers have become familiar by now, as have some of the people waiting at the counters. Indeed, while I was waiting in the hall to find out when I should return to collect the visa sticker, I spotted known faces: managers of international NGOs registering their staff and volunteers. (Excerpt from the field journal, April 2024, Sarajevo)

I returned in mid-April to the office towards the end of the week and finally received my volunteer visa printout. The timing of the application intersected with that of my research in Sarajevo. The drawn-out pace of bureaucracy – characterised by waiting, uncertainty, and opacity – produced a sense of precariousness, raising doubts about conducting research for longer than three continuous months. "What if they don't renew my permit? What if they ultimately reject my visa application?" – these concerns accompanied the temporary document renewal process. With just one month remaining, having resigned myself to renewing the temporary

permit every two months, the visa's arrival finally stabilised my position in the country. In this sense, as it unfolded over the entire course of my presence in Sarajevo, the procedure acted not merely as an administrative requirement, but as a structuring force shaping the contours, rhythm, and emotional dimensions of my fieldwork.

## CONCLUSION

This autoethnographic account demonstrates that the visa procedure did not merely accompany my fieldwork in Sarajevo but actively structured its conditions of possibility. As a prerequisite for remaining in the field, it shaped the temporality of research, mediated access to institutions, and informed the relationships through which knowledge was produced. The visa thus became ethnographic data, a presence-absence which, through renewals and appointments, contributed to organising the rhythm of fieldwork. The bureaucratic process emerged as a site in which institutions were not only observed but directly encountered and negotiated.

Rather than treating bureaucratic waiting as an external disruption to ethnographic research, this article approaches it as a methodological and analytical resource. The uncertainty surrounding the visa application emerged within an everyday routine structured around volunteering and participation in solidarity activities. In this sense, the experience belongs to what Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995) describe as the "doing" of ethnography – a dimension that is interdependent with the "writing" through which face-to-face encounters are rendered into an ethnographic account. The procedure plays a part in shaping not only the temporal organisation of the research but also the relationships that developed, the spaces I entered, and the forms of knowledge that became available. The bureaucratic encounter thus functioned simultaneously as a constraint and as an opportunity: while it exposed the conditionality of my presence, it also created moments of proximity, collaboration, and insight that would otherwise not have occurred. The frictions emerging from these two poles are closely linked to the researcher's positionality: the privilege of travel transforms into a negotiation to remain, and through this negotiation, the possibility of staying in Bosnia as a volunteer within an "urban solidarity space" (Arampatzi 2017) is produced. In this sense, the experience of obtaining the visa foregrounds the intersubjective and relational dimensions through which knowledge is produced.

Highlighting the asymmetry of power experienced by the researcher is analytically significant, as it situates emotions within the everyday practice of ethnography. More broadly, this article argues for placing the

unexpected at the centre of methodological reflection, particularly where it emerges in the gap between fieldwork planning and its unfolding. Bureaucratic complications, delays, and “mini-dramas” (Crapanzano 2010), often overlooked as obstacles, are also moments in which power relations, institutional logics, and positionalities become most visible. Attending to these disruptions shows how knowledge is produced through negotiation and uncertainty.

By bringing into dialogue the literature on bureaucracy and on emotions in fieldwork, this contribution demonstrates that administrative procedures, far from marginal, are central aspects of the fieldwork experience. In this sense, the visa procedure highlights how the state, through its institutions, enters the research process not only as an object of study, but as a structuring force in shaping the conditions under which ethnographic knowledge is produced.

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