

Chronology of the Balkan Route

Povzetek

Kronologija balkanske poti

Članek poskuša razdelati genealogijo mejnega režima na balkanski poti, pri čemer kot izhodišče vzame nastanek balkanskega koridorja in spremembe, ki so sledile po njegovem zaprtju. Meje obravnava kot spreminjajoča se mesta spopada med avtonomijo migracij in mehanizmi upravljanja migracij. V kontekstu globalnih kapitalističnih odnosov so meje sredstvo prerazporejanja globalnega bogastva in ohranjanja razrednih neenakosti. A ker so meje hkrati plastične, na mejni režim bistveno vpliva spreminjajoče se množično gibanje ljudi, ki ga sprožajo ravno tiste globalne neenakosti, ki jih mejni režim skuša uveljaviti. Besedilo izhaja iz konceptualizacije meja kot mejnih krajin in ponuja pregled pomembnejših sprememb mejnega režima, ki se odziva na strategije in taktike neregularnih migracijskih gibanj. Na začetku je obravnavan nastanek dispozitiva mejnega režima balkanske poti pred tako imenovanim dolгим poletjem migracij v letu 2015. Nadalje se posveča razvoju štirih faz balkanskega koridorja – od neformalne faze do njegove formalizacije in končno zaprtja marca 2016, ki je bilo izvedeno z obsežno militarizacijo meja in sistematičnim verižnim vračanjem migrantov. Članek obravnava tudi obdobje po zaprtju koridorja, ko se je linearna balkanska pot spremenila v prisilno krožno gibanje zaradi policijskega nasilja in izgonov. V zaključnem delu članek obravnava obdobje med epidemijo covid-19 in opisuje glavne dogodke v mejnem režimu v Sloveniji od leta 2022 naprej.

Ključne besede: balkanska pot, balkanski koridor, balkanski krog, iregularne migracije, evropski mejni režim

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Abstract

The article seeks to elaborate on the genealogy of the border regime of the Balkan Route, taking as its starting point the emergence of the Balkan Corridor and the permutations that followed its closure. It examines borders as shifting places of contestation between the autonomy of migration and mechanisms of border management. In global capitalist relations, borders serve as a means of redistributing global wealth and preserving class inequalities. Yet because borders are, at the same time, essentially plastic, the border regime is influenced by changing migration movements facilitated by the same global inequalities it seeks to enforce. Drawing on the conceptualisation of borders as borderscapes, the article provides an overview of the more significant developments in the border regime of the Balkan Route, responding to the strategies and tactics of people on the move. Starting from the diapositives of the border regime before the so-called long summer of migration in 2015, the article elaborates on the four phases of the Balkan Corridor. It traces the main events from the informal corridor to its formalized phase and to its closure, enacted through border militarisation and the practice of systematic chain pushbacks across the region. As discussed in the article, the closure of the corridor transformed the linear Balkan Route into a Balkan Circuit. The article also deals with the permutations of the border regime during the Covid-19 epidemic and describes the main developments in Slovenia from 2022 onwards.

Keywords: Balkan Route, Balkan Corridor, Balkan Circuit, irregular migration, European border regime

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The borders are often thought of as absolute—hard, static lines that cannot be transgressed. Yet the truth is the opposite: borders deploy tactics and strategies because of their essential gap, not despite it. Because they are essentially porous and their essence is a gap in itself, they have to appear as a firm, static line. Yet their concrete formation is shaped by the possibility of transgression and by concrete transgressions that occur within a specific area and historical and political context. Insofar as they are substantially a concrete strategy and the tactics they use, they are made from the ground up, even if they necessarily want to present themselves as primarily formed the other way around: from the top down. That is not to say borders have heterogeneous functions in capitalism. They serve as a tool of global inequality and class division; as a means to demarcate the global centre from the periphery, from where capital can extract and accumulate wealth while generating a cheap labour force. The extraction of wealth through past colonial and current neocolonial practices, and the induced pauperisation of people on the periphery (as well as concrete military interventions from the West), produce global migration. At the same time, borders try to regulate, allowing the free flow of capital while limiting the movement of people. As such, borders in the current global capitalist regime serve as a delimitation of its own symptom, a point of reaffirmation of the regime itself, keeping inequalities intact also by producing precarious living conditions for migrants, who can be used as cheap labour in the countries of the centre.

But despite this global role, when looked at more concretely—how a border operates—they are, as said, essentially plastic. Because of inherent gaps in border regimes, the borders are adaptive. They extend not only outwards, which is, as we will see in its externalising tendency, one of the main *modus operandi* of the border regime today, but also inwards, inside the states, with all the restrictions of regularisation of status and living conditions for migrants. Borders should not be understood simply as “*violent, thoughtless and mechanistic tools of surveillance but also as tools that are reframed again and again by the power of migration and migrant tactics*” (Pajnik, 2019: 128). They are also essentially adaptive, in the sense that the strategies they deploy are in reactive coherence with migration movements. Or, put the other way around, migrant movements codetermine the strategies of border regimes by highlighting their inherent gaps. Because they are porous they exist primarily through the way they operate - what borders are is essentially determined through how they are. This applies not only to the wider capitalist context but also to the concrete strategies they employ.

Because their ontology is dependent on concrete practice, because their essence is primarily the strategies they employ in a certain time and place and in reaction to migration movements, the method we will take in this article is genealogical. We will try to condense and outline the development of the so-called

Balkan Route, noting key events from the establishment of the migrant corridor in 2015 onward. To articulate the development of the route, we will attempt to answer questions such as: how did the situation of migration movements change, and what strategies were employed? What marked the beginning and end of the stages of the border regime, and what kind of logic arose from the tactics? What perspective does the autonomy of migration bring to this practice, or, put differently, who is predominantly sovereign in border regimes? In our attempts to understand the history of the movement and management of the route, we developed a framework based on three key notions: the Balkan Route, the Balkan Corridor, and the Balkan Circuit. These notions have already been introduced in academic research; we intended to look back and put them in a perspective that allows us to follow the decade-long development of the Balkan Route as an ever-changing space of struggle between migrant movements and border regimes' attempts to stem it. The concept of border plasticity, as presented here, offers both a conceptual and an empirical guide for defining relations that shape understanding of the route.

Development of the Balkan Route

The migrations through the Balkans have a long history spanning centuries. *The Balkan Route* is a term that has had various meanings over the years, signifying both the movement of people and goods and the transportation of arms and drugs. Since 2015, when discussing migration, the term has been used interchangeably with the term *The Balkan Corridor*. For the sake of clarity, it is important that we note the distinction between both signifiers as we use them further on.

The Balkan Route refers to a multiplicity of pathways defined by irregular migration stretching across the Balkan Peninsula, usually starting in the streets of Istanbul or the shores of Izmir, and then diverging into numerous routes crossing borders by sea or land to Greece or Bulgaria. From there, the Route further multiplies with people walking through forests or using different means of transportation (and risking detention, police violence, and deportation) to secretly cross borders of several states before finally arriving at train stations in Italy or Austria to continue their travels. While the stories of migrant struggles do not end with the arrival to, for example, Trieste, the term *the Balkan Route* encompasses the region where migration is in large part transit, meaning that the countries of the area are not the destination countries of immigration. The Balkans, itself an EU periphery and a source of migrant labour, does not offer

sufficient opportunities for regularisation and employment for many people passing through the territory. Even national policies of asylum are often informally made and practiced in a way that forces asylum seekers to leave the country rather than wait for a decision under a threat of detention and deportation in the case of a very likely negative decision. The Balkan Route is in this sense a loosely geographically defined *borderscape* of the Balkan Peninsula that consists of a national and EU border management network that does not only focus on border areas but spans across territories and consists of different control centres (patrols, high-tech fences with movement detection, drones), asylum camps, detention camps and similar places and institutions whose role it is to maintain an order of exclusion and the norm, the citizen and the migrant, the legal and illegal. The institutional network that extends beyond national authorities and involves international actors and decision-makers is creating conditions in which the movement of people crossing the Balkan Route is becoming ever more challenging and dangerous, to the point of being life-threatening. The creation of such conditions of a borderscape remains hidden from 'normal' daily realities:

The border, or borderscape, is replete with actors and agents responding to, resisting, and relaying the set of discourses and practices that envision the border as an empty and pliable instrument of separation. That is, those elements who are rendered unaccountable, who have no reason to be visible, do not simply disappear; it takes an act of some will, as well as a certain amount of institutional force, to effect their invisibility and erase their relation to the norm. (Rajaram, Grundy-Warr, 2007: XVII)

But just as much as instances of repression of movement define the Balkan Route, it is equally determined by the agents of that movement. The term Balkan Route must thus, as a core element, include those who cross borders without travel permits and create routes and pathways despite the systems of institutional violence that produce their exclusion and illegality. The ever-shifting interplay between the irregular movement of people across borders and border management means that, over time, different directions on the Balkan Route become more or less prevalent as border controls, detention and deportation practices, police violence, or smuggler rates change. But the Route, defined by innumerable pathways and strategies of crossing the borders, remains a constant and ever-changing practice of challenging and overcoming national and European border regimes, which represent instruments of a system that thrives on maintaining global relations of inequality.

The Balkans have a long and layered history of migration and movement. During Roman times, a road known as *via Militaris* was built in the 1st century CE, connecting *Byzantium* and *Singidunum* (Belgrade). The road was well-maintained during the Byzantine rule and was even used during the Crusades. Following the Middle Ages, the region came under the authority of the Ottoman Empire. Until 1878, a traveller could pass from Syria to Serbia without crossing any borders, and the region served as an important transit route connecting the Ottoman Empire with Central Europe. The rise of national ideologies and the establishment of national states in the 19th and 20th centuries led to the building up of borders, which increasingly became barriers to movement (Riedler and Stefanov, 2021: 2–11). The region deeply connected to the histories of international and even intercontinental trade, the movement of armies, labour migration, and the flight of refugees. From the luxurious Orient Express, connecting Paris and Istanbul, and the Berlin–Baghdad railway, seeking direct access to oil in Persia, to the flight of refugees during World War II, when Europeans fled to Syria, Egypt, and Palestine; from trains in the 1960s, departing from Istanbul and Athens, that took migrant workers to Germany and Austria, to the Highway of Brotherhood and Unity (*Autoput Bratstva i Jedinstva*) in Yugoslavia, and the most recent Pan-European Transport Corridors, launched in the '90s, the Balkans has been a place of constant transition and movement (Hameršak et al., 2020: 16).

The origin of the term the Balkan Route is linked to efforts to control this persistent movement. It was first used by police and security services to track the routes of arms and drug smuggling. During the 1990s, the term became increasingly used in the context of irregular migration, especially with the increased movement of refugees fleeing the wars of Yugoslavia and war and persecution in Iraq (Stojić Mitrović, 2022). Eventually, the term became a regional signifier of a certain dispositif that became a standard model of the EU border regime, extending well beyond EU borders. The practice of externalising EU border policies into wider peripheries emerged in parallel with the construction of the Schengen border project, initiated in 1985 and further developed in the 1990s. If the flow of goods and labour were free within the Union, the outside would have to be controlled to reduce disruptive elements such as irregular migration. To control and reduce the movement of the unwanted and the unvetted, the transit states outside the EU had to become buffer zones where whole territories became means of deterrence of migration by the introduction of systemic practices of illegalisation, detention, and deportation. The mechanism of the expansion of this extended EU border regime is the EU integration process. The integration promises, trade agreements, development aid, visa quotas, and similar tools are tools the EU uses to negotiate and influence the border policies of transit

and origin states. Through the process of integration, the Balkan Route as a dispositif, meaning a widespread mechanism of certain management practice and control, became one of the building blocks of Fortress Europe:

This discreet framing of illegal immigration as a de facto threat of mutual concern serves to rationalize a strategy of using cooperation in the area of migration control as a bargaining chip in negotiations with countries bordering the EU. Such cooperation could entail, for example, a deepening of coordination between law enforcement and military bodies on either side of the EU's external border.
(Hassan Ould Moctar, 2016)

One of the earlier events that led to the increased efforts of building up the security mechanisms to control irregular migration through the Balkans was the arrival of Kurdish refugees from Iraq, fleeing war and persecution, to Greece and Italy in 1997 and 1998 (Statewatch, 1999). The reaction to the arrivals was the so-called *Action Plan Iraq*, formulated by the European Council, concretely the Justice and Home Affairs Council. It adopted a new logic of migration control that came with the establishment of *Schengenland*. It conclusively established a more immediate relationship with the extended areas, where the borders have to become not only an inward concern of the economic Schengen zone but also an area of interregional cooperation and management, which increasingly expands into territories beyond direct EU jurisdiction. The problem of migration posed in the newly conceptualised border was not just establishing checkpoints along the border. Stopping migration movements now has become a question of tackling the entire logistics of 'migrant networks', as well as expanding the geographical space where controlling and deterring migration must take place. The border regime no longer operated only at the borders of European countries but also conceptually extended to countries of origin and transit. *Action Plan Iraq* in this sense represents an articulation of a new *modus operandi* of border management, a new conceptual and practical approach in which "the targeting semantics of the route now motivate its very logistics ('illegal immigration networks') and its entire geographical expanse ('pre-frontier assistance', 'transit countries', 'Turkey')" (Hess and Kasperek, 2022: 197).

The described approach to border management, defined by new knowledge production and externalisation and expansion of movement control, was not limited to the Balkans. The same process is and has been used in attempts to control movement across 'migration routes' (Mediterranean routes, Sahel routes, etc.). After the events in Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, when hundreds of mi-

grants attempted to cross the heavily guarded fence and were met with brutal police violence and expulsions to Morocco, leading to 13 deaths in months from August to October 2005 (Amnesty, 2006), the Council of the European Union met in London. It adopted a document called the *Global Approach to Migration*, which established a new framework for EU external migration and asylum policy. With the adoption of the new framework, which was further developed by the European Commission in the *Global Approach to Migration and Mobility* in 2011, the new dispositif of externalized border management emerging from the *Action Plan Iraq* became an official policy of the EU (Hes and Kasperek, 2021: 23).

As far as controlling the border is controlling the routes, the term Balkan route holds a crucial role in the discursive formation of present EU migration management. The Balkan Route became a vital element in the discursive instruments of the European Union, which were creating migration as an object of control in the context of the enlargement process. In 1993, after the Soviet Union fell apart and Europe was concerned about migration from the East, a ministerial conference was organised in Budapest. Representatives from 35 governments attended the conference, whose aim was to establish a geographically all-encompassing policy of migration control. The recommendations of the conference focused on strict visa policies and border controls, readmission agreements, criminalising smuggling, and the exchange of information. The Budapest process, with a crucial role from the think tank International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) provided the discourse that established migration as an object of control by creating a common problem space:

Central to this binding together was the production and processing of data and knowledge on the movements of migration, thus enabling the gaze on the Balkan Route and giving it shape in the form of statistics, for example, on apprehension figures, or through the use of maps, published in recurring yearbooks. This specific knowledge-power complex was a highly strategic and indeed innovative answer to the challenges posed both by the enlargement of the EU and the rise of new movements of migration in the region. (Hess and Kasperek, 2022: 201)

The Balkan Route, constructed through the lens of security and movement control, represents the EU's general approach to the externalisation of border management. The same neo-colonial practices of influencing internal policies, policing practices, and legislation by conditioning access to trade and development agreements can be seen in other regions. One such example is the *Joint Valletta Action Plan*, adopted at the Valletta Summit in November 2015, which

brought together EU and African heads of state to address increased irregular migration across the Mediterranean. The action plan, among other things, established a platform for cooperation to combat irregular migration and facilitate readmissions in the Western Sahel region through the provision of funds, advisors, equipment, and training from the EU (Valletta Summit, 2015). The goal of this meeting was to stem the migration in the Sahel to decrease the number of migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

The conceptual construction of the Balkan Route is that of a *dispositif*—a certain governmentality—established along the wider external borders of the EU, stretching all the way to the Sahel. In this approach, borders are not static elements that limit a state's territory, but rather whole areas that must be managed and controlled with the specific aim of curbing and deterring irregular migration. The border is not a checkpoint but a *borderscape*, a diffuse network of control centres with state of the art movement detection equipment, remote detention centres, centralised databases, quick procedure courts with undefined legislation that allows mass incarceration of supposed smugglers, asylum camps that can quickly become closed centres restricting movement or allowing relocation, readmission agreements that enable fast-track deportations, multinational joint-patrol operations spreading through forests and rivers and so on. Through the operation of these networks, which separate accepted and allowed movement from the irregular and unwanted movement, the practice of separation, of racial targeting, of 'finding the illegal' becomes widespread.

But just as the Balkan Route is a form of border management practice, it is also a space of resistance. The externalisation of the EU border regime is a response to the illegalised movement of people demanding equal rights within a system established through the enforcement of global inequality. In a globalised capitalist economy, the borders operate as a means of separating peripheries from the international centres of power. The extraction of wealth to global centres, unending wars, and the pauperisation of the peripheries lead to increased migration movements, which border regimes try to curb to maintain the system that produces and depends on these inequalities. The movement of people, which persists despite all efforts at deterrence, should be seen as an act of resistance against the conditions of global inequality, which are also expressed through the unequal right to move. The Balkan Route is not only an expression of an extended security apparatus; it is also an effect of numerous acts of resistance against imposed movement restrictions. The strength of this movement should be compared with the efforts to stem it. And on occasions, the security apparatus fails in comparison. Suddenly, no border, no control tower, no police patrol, no camp is enough to stop the movement, which, without governments, elected leaders, or campaigns, forces the border policies to change radically. Such was the period of the Bal-

kan Corridor of 2015 and 2016, when a collision of events forced national states to open their borders to allow passage of those without the legal right to move.

The Balkan Corridor in this sense represents a period of the development of the Balkan Route from early 2015 to first months of 2016 when, due to influx of Syrian refugees, the increased number of people crossing the Turkey-Greece border and then borders further north forced temporary radical change in border management politics when national and EU leaders opened the borders and allowed passage of people from Greece to Austria or Germany. The increased number of people crossing borders irregularly in the first half of 2015 led to the eventual establishment of a formalised corridor in late summer 2015 that facilitated the movement of people in a manner not seen in recent history. The strength of the movement forced national and EU leaders to coordinate a response, suspending the border regime, temporarily legalising border crossings, and allowing transit across national territories by train, bus, or on foot, accompanied by state police. The period of the Balkan Corridor was not in any way a linear and organised event, but a phenomena defined by solidarity, struggles and conflicts coming from all sides and at all levels, on the streets, in camps or at meetings of officials, *“the opening and closing of the corridor was a messy and complicated process”* (Santer and Wriedt, 2017: 142). As a crucial moment of the development of the Balkan Route, the Corridor cannot be understood simply in its formalised phase. The formation of the Corridor had its roots in increased movement during its early ‘informal’ stage, and the closure of the formalised passage had profound consequences, leading to the systematised practice of detentions, brutal police violence, and pushbacks across the Balkan Route.

The four phases of the Balkan Corridor

While the migration across the Balkan Route remains a constant, the period between 2015 and 2016, known as The Balkan Corridor, presents an unprecedented event that defined the migration space for years after. Researchers who travelled the route at the time roughly divided the timeline into four phases: a clandestine phase, an open route, a formalised corridor, and a return to the clandestine phase (El-Shaarawi and Razsa, 2019; Hess and Kasperek, 2022). This distinction of the phases provides a useful chronological structure, and by building on it, we sought to further develop it by emphasising how it was affected by the interplay between border management and the autonomy of migration. It should be noted that transitions from one phase to another are gradual rather than abrupt. Regarding geographical distinctions, the introduction of different

stages is usually not simultaneous, but instead follows a domino effect, either from south to north or from north to south.

The first clandestine phase is associated with the movement along the route in the early months of 2015 and even 2014, when, in general, the slowly increasing movement of people was hidden from public attention and everyday politics. As the number of people crossing grew, so did media attention to the topic. The second phase, the open route, is used to note the period of spring and summer of 2015, when, due to the flight of Syrian refugees, an increased number of people were crossing borders from Turkey to Greece and then moving northward. This led to a situation in which the movement's reality forced its way into public attention. The *long summer of migration*, as it was named by researchers (Kasperek and Speer, 2015), is characterised by a rapid increase in the number of boat arrivals to the shores of the Greek islands and the movement of large groups across borders. The states scrambled in response, usually trying to facilitate movement with *ad hoc* measures, such as transit visas and decriminalisation of transportation of irregular migrants. In February 2015, the activists of Alarm-phone, operating an emergency hotline for boats in distress, noted a shift in the Greek coast guard responses, which became more responsive and cooperative in conducting rescue operations in the Aegean Sea (Hagen, 2025). The irregular crossings of thousands of people mobilised solidarity efforts and eventually led to government responses that were not restrictive but rather facilitated the movement. Sometimes these efforts came as reactions to tragic events, such as the death of 14 people in North Macedonia who were hit by a train while walking on the tracks. To enable regularised and safer movement, the North Macedonian parliament adopted legislation in June 2015 that allowed people on the move to obtain a 72-hour transit travel permit and to apply for asylum at a police station. In practice, the travel permit became a transit visa. Such legislation already existed in Serbia (Beznec et al., 2016: 18). In Greece, the government led by Syriza partially decriminalised the transportation of irregular migrants, thereby opening the borders of the Balkan Route from Greece to Hungary (Hess and Kasperek, 2022: 188).

In June 2015, the Hungarian government began constructing a fence along its border with Serbia and declared that it would not accept Dublin returnees. The decision was soon revoked after pressure from other member states. The Budapest Keleti train station became an informal transit hub, even though people on the move could not use official means of transportation. According to EU asylum regulations, the thousands coming to Hungary should have waited in Hungary to process their asylum request, which was entirely out of touch with reality, especially with the notoriously unwelcoming and restrictive asylum policies of Hungary. The open borders of the Schengen zone enabled the provision of var-

ious informal and clandestine services of quick transport across the borders to Central European states (Kasperek, 2016: 4). Despite various attempts of deterrence, the movement persevered. To stem the movement, the North Macedonian Government declared a national emergency on 20 August and temporarily closed the border with Greece. Rapid build-up of people stuck at the border and clashes with the riot police led the government to reverse its decision only two days after and provide transit trains to the Serbian border (Kasperek, 2016: 3).

On 25 August, an official paper from the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees leaked to the press. The paper stated a possible German intention to suspend the Dublin Regulation for Syrian asylum seekers, which led Germany to become the most sought-after destination. Two days later, Austrian police discovered an abandoned lorry with 71 corpses of people who suffocated as they were smuggled across borders. In response to the tragic event, Austrian police increased the controls at the borders with Hungary, and in turn, the passage towards Central Europe was blocked. In response to the growing number of people stuck at Keleti station, Hungary tried to bring them into camps but was unsuccessful. In September, migrants and refugees themselves started an initiative known as 'March of Hope' in which thousands began marching towards the Hungary-Austria border. In response to the uncontrollable situation of the mass movement, Germany and Austria announced they would open their borders, allowing people to move openly and quickly (Kasperek, 2016: 5).

The March of Hope and the decisions of the member states to open borders and somewhat control the movement represents the end of the second phase of the Corridor and beginning of the third phase, which is defined by high visibility of the movement in media, mobilisation of all sectors of civil society and state sponsored measures that eventually created a 'special zone' of movement either by walking or transport with buses and trains from one border to another from Greece to Germany. By no means were the transfers completely agreed upon between bordering states. The creation of a formalised corridor is rife with international conflicts, in which states forcibly block entry or force people on the move to cross into the following country without any international cooperation or even notification. As time passed, the transit became more coordinated, and international cooperation became increasingly important, especially when the states agreed on the means to close the corridor.

Sporadic use of state-sponsored transportation was already evident in earlier months of 2015; people on the move have noted organised bus services from Athens and Thessaloniki to the border with North Macedonia in spring 2015 (Stojić Mitrović et al., 2023). In North Macedonia, the government, at the same time as they introduced the 72-hour travel permit, began organising transportation from the Gevgelija camp on the Greek border to the Tabanovce camp at the

Serbian border (Beznec et. al., 2016: 20). The policy of Serbia was never to control the movement fully; the state rather organised registration centres at entry points at borders with Bulgaria and North Macedonia from where people could travel with taxis or buses (Stojić Mitrović et. al., 2023). As movement continued, the first state to close its borders was Hungary, which built a border fence with Serbia and Croatia. On 15 September, the Hungarian police closed the railway crossing, which had been used as the main entry point. The closure of the border was followed by clashes with Hungarian riot police who used tear gas and water cannons to disperse protesting crowds (BBC, 2015). The route then changed into Croatia, and people on the move were transferred to the newly established 'exit point' near the Croatian border. Despite Croatia temporarily closing its border with Serbia, large numbers of people crossed the green border and entered the country through fields. The Croatian authorities provided short-term reception centres and organised further transportation from the Tovarnik train station to Hungary, which led to a diplomatic incident when Hungarian police disarmed Croatian officers on trains accompanying people on the move (RTV MMC, 2015).

A month later, on the night of 16 to 17 October 2015, Hungary, after completing the second border fence, closed the border with Croatia, which in turn announced it would direct the corridor towards Slovenia (BBC, 2015b). People on the move were already present on the borders with Slovenia, but in smaller numbers. The Slovene authorities processed and provided transit to Austria, but on a scale insufficient for the thousands crossing the Balkan route daily (Al Jazeera, 2015). On the night of 20 October, Croatia brought an unannounced passenger train to the border with Slovenia near Dobova. As people disembarked, the Croatian police escorted them to the green border and showed them the way to Slovenia. The mass of people dispersed, crossed the Sotla River, and eventually settled in the fields, where they were further directed by Slovenian police for processing and transit (Slovenian Police, 2015). Eventually, the movement across borders became more coordinated, with transit organised further along the Austrian border at Šentilj. Attempts by states to control and stem the movement were often met with protests and clashes. A fire broke out at the reception centre in Brežice, which was suspected to have been started by those being held there as a form of protest to speed up their journey north (Deutsche Welle, 2015).

In response to the inability of state authorities to control the movement and the resulting increased civil and diplomatic tensions, on 25 October 2015 an EU summit of affected states, together with Albania, Serbia, and North Macedonia, was held in Brussels. The goal of the meeting was to establish a common approach to controlling the mass movement of people across the Balkans via an internationally coordinated corridor, as there was no capacity to stop it. The corridor, in many senses, became a zone of exclusion from regular legislative and

administrative networks. To control the movement, the states were forced to make concessions, suspend their border policies, and accept measures outside the standard legal code. The constitution of the *state of exception* can be clearly seen in the establishment of the corridor as an entity existing outside the regular order that is at the same time called upon to secure its continued existence:

One thoroughly consistent testimony from migrants is heard in many places along this corridor. Asked why they do not leave the corridor and pursue an alternative path, the answer is that if you leave the flow, you are lost. Outside the corridor, you are subject to the regime of asylum, detention, and deportation. Only inside the corridor, you are allowed to move. The corridor, stretching across and seemingly connecting many countries, has a constitution of its own. One might characterise it as 'extraterritorial' to better capture the different laws and rules that apply within (as opposed to those without). (Kasperk, 2016: 6)

The same extra-legal measures that facilitated the movement eventually enabled the closure of the corridor. The *exceptionality* of these measures meant they were not constrained by the time-consuming checks and balances of standard legal frameworks but could be adopted without notice to enact the will of sovereign political power. The sovereign power here is the EU border regime. On 18 November 2015, a general decision was made that passage along the corridor was allowed only for nationals of Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. A measure limiting access to asylum based on nationality was made with complete disregard for international norms of the *Geneva Convention*. The reason was primarily practical as these three nationalities presented the largest groups of people moving through the corridor (Kasperek, 2016: 7). At that time, North Macedonia, along with Croatia, Slovenia, and Austria, began screening and segregating people based on country of origin. The partial border closure was a sign of things to come. Many who did not meet the set criteria were left stranded in the camps and on the borders, and informal settlements proliferated, leaving people to their own devices. Those caught by police for irregular border crossing were faced with police violence and were pushed back across to try again (Beznec et al., 2016: 21-25). Efforts to close the corridor further developed after the meeting of interior ministers of the states of the Balkan Route in Zagreb on 18 February 2016, only days after Austria announced a cap on transit of 3,200 refugees per day, setting a domino effect across borders to the south. By the agreement, Afghans became exempt from the corridor, and only Syrian and Iraqi refugees were allowed to pass. The police chiefs agreed to jointly organise the transporta-

tion of refugees from the Greece-North Macedonia border and conduct nationality profiling at each border (BIRN, 2016).

Further plans for a joint operation of closing the corridor were developed at the Balkan Conference in Vienna hosted by Austria on 24 February 2016, attended by representatives of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia under the guise of the discourse of “*managing migration together*” (Tošić, 2017: 153). On the Greece-North Macedonia border, the number of people allowed to cross was decreasing day by day. In the Greek border city of Idomeni, the number of people stranded grew. Eventually, a protest erupted, which escalated into a clash with Macedonian police using tear gas to disperse the crowds (Karakoulaki, 2016). The corridor was officially closed on 8 March 2016, with a TV announcement from the Slovenian Prime Minister saying, “*Balkan refugee route is no more*” (BIRN, 2016b). The declaration came only a day after the EU summit with Turkish leaders on implementing a joint action plan to limit irregular migration. The borders of North Macedonia, Croatia, and Slovenia were closed on the same day, which effectively ended the corridor. Final event that marks the end of the formalised corridor was the agreement signed between EU and Turkey, that promised 6 billion euros of financial aid to Turkey, which would accept the return of persons irregularly arriving on Greek islands, take measures to stop irregular migration and step in to a scheme of relocation of Syrian refugees to EU in one to one basis (IRC, 2022).

The state's measures to coordinate actions on the formalisation of the corridor were dubbed a humanitarian effort. Still, the development of the corridor shows that, in many ways, the state's actions were made in concession to people who demanded the right to move forward. The movement across the route from September and October 2015 shows that the states along the Balkan Route were forced to enable movement and even facilitate it to control it. When faced with an increased number of people arriving at the borders, the states took any measures necessary to either stop entry or provide transit so the mass movement could continue to the next state, in some cases even without further notice or agreement. Faced with the scale and number of people crossing borders irregularly, the countries along the Balkan Route scrambled to provide necessary responses. Eventually, international cooperation led to the formalisation of the corridor, which enabled faster travel but also created conditions for the effective closure of the borders. It seems the humanitarian nature of the corridor was a shaky label that fell away as soon as state officials sensed they had enough power to slowly close it by limiting access and eventually declaring and enforcing a full closure. At the time, the humanitarian need was still very present, as there were still a high number of arrivals to the Greek islands, and only in Idomeni were 12.000 people waiting to cross the border (Hameršak and Pleše, 2017: 23).

The closure of borders and the EU-Turkey deal in March 2016 marked the end of the third phase of the corridor, defined by the formalisation of movement, which eventually led to temporary international cooperation for transit from Greece to Germany. The same cooperation, absent in the earlier stages of the corridor, enabled the corridor to be closed through extensive reestablishment and strengthening of the EU border regime. The corridor closure was gradual to limit inevitable clashes with those who remained stranded. The fourth phase, defined by the reestablishment of the EU border regime and by movement again becoming clandestine, is represented by violent policies of containment and pushbacks, which reinstated and further developed the borderscape of the Balkan Route.

To stem the movement on the Balkan Route, the EU's hotspot plan was implemented on the Greek islands of Kos, Leros, Samos, Chios, and Lesbos. The camps on the islands became a containment zone intended for the deportation of those whose claim for asylum would be denied, as the Greek government did not allow the asylum seekers to move freely towards the continent. The practice of containment persisted for years, creating unbearable living conditions marked by extreme overcrowding. In 2019, the MSF noted the horrendous condition of 24,000 trapped in the island camps without sufficient access to basic living necessities (MSF, 2019). On Lesbos, camp Moria became infamous for frequent fires. The camp, designed for 3,000, had more than 13,000 residents in 2020, when a fire destroyed it (BBC, 2020). Any resistance or protest against the mistreatment and horrid living conditions was met with complete dehumanisation, with arbitrary arrests, brutal police violence, mock trials, and deportations to Turkey, which was clearly shown in the case of Moria 35 (Lesbos Legal Centre, 2017). The second mechanism of reinstating the border regime was the systemic use of pushbacks, which became a prevalent police practice along the Balkan Route. Pushbacks are a practice of informal and illegal fast-track deportations of persons who were apprehended for irregular border crossing back across the border. Deportations can be carried out in cooperation with neighbouring police at border checkpoints or without notice across the green border. Police often use heavy physical violence and destruction of property, such as phones or clothes, leaving people stranded in remote areas without immediate assistance. Although already present before, the practice of pushbacks became systemic in the years following the closure of the corridor. The especially severe violence was and still is perpetrated by Greek, Bulgarian, and Croatian police.

Policies of containment and pushbacks created conditions in which movement across the Route became much more difficult, forcing people to spend more time and resources to continue onward. The Balkan Route became a trap where movement was not transit but rather circular, as people were detained or transported to remote camps, or, when irregular border crossing attempts failed, de-

ported back and forced to try repeatedly. To cross territories and borders, people on the move were again forced into invisibility. The containment policy and the proliferation of pushbacks mark the end of the Balkan Corridor and the return to clandestine movement across the Balkan Route. Despite its temporary nature, the establishment of the corridor marks a historic and transformative event in which national and EU borders collapsed under pressure from those with no legal right to move within the global economy of unequal exchange. The mass movement forced a radical change in border politics and mobilized solidarity on a truly massive scale. New solidarity initiatives sprang up, and grassroots international cooperation developed along the Route, which, in many cases, still persists. To note a few examples, in Slovenia, the *Antiracist Front Without Borders* (Protirasistična fronta brez meja), operating in Ljubljana in the former Rog Factory squat, became a hub of mass donation distribution and information sharing for both activists and people on the move. In Croatia, *Are You Syrious?*, an NGO still operating today, was established and became one of the main points of aid distribution, playing a hugely important role in combating pushbacks in the years that followed. With the establishment of the Corridor, the reality of irregular migration along the Balkan Route could no longer remain a topic for the crime section but became a fundamentally political issue crossing lines of ethnicity, residency status, race, gender, or class. The consequential nature of the corridor is thus both apparent in the broadening and strengthening of migration struggles and in the violent reaction of the EU border regime, which re-established its framework after the closure.

From the Balkan Corridor to the Balkan Circuit

The Balkan corridor ended as it started—in clandestine. The same can be said of the entire European border regime. After the long summer of migration, it reiterated itself. The answer that European policies gave during the long summer of migration was, conceptually, the same as always: it wanted more of itself. In 2015, the *European Agenda on Migration* stressed that greater centralisation, greater harmonisation, and greater financing were needed, grounded in the same principles of asylum, externalisation, and legal migration. Yet the repetition of the same border regime brought about its difference. The reestablished regime widened the practice of pushbacks across the external borders of the EU. In the Balkans, border fences sprang up, and the systemic violent practice of pushbacks was introduced, changing the mostly linear route on the Balkan Route at the time of the corridor into a circuit. And as we already emphasised,

the border regime changes not despite people on the move but because of them. Because of the long summer of migration, and because of the tactics and strategies employed by migrants, the politics of externalisation created a *containment zone* in the Balkans, trapping many on the outskirts of the EU without options to continue their journey.

The deal with Turkey and the establishment of hotspots in Greece were responses to the crisis of the European border regime, a crisis that began before the long summer of migration.¹ As the external border in Greece became more restricted, control and violence of the border regime became enacted also inwards, transforming states like Serbia from a transit country to a buffer zone and dumping ground. As we have already mentioned, the first state to close its borders was Hungary, which only heightened its restrictive policies afterwards, redirecting the route through Croatia and Slovenia. In addition to passing laws that restricted services for asylum seekers, Hungary legalised pushbacks in 2016 and further reinforced this legislation in 2017. This legislation legally prescribed the automatic pushback of people crossing the fence and the detention

1 Apart from the fact that the 'crisis' of the border regime began before the prolonged period of migration, the crisis of the European border regime is structural. It is structural in three ways. Firstly, the strategy and discursive formulation of the crisis adopted during the long summer of migration was crucial for the interventions during and after the establishment of the Balkan corridor, which served as a means of operating outside the legal framework and allocating funds. It is also structural in the sense that the European Union and the Schengen Zone are based on the neoliberal premise of the free movement of goods, services, and capital. Yet, there are problems with consolidating this with the biopolitical will to control the movement of people. Consequently, the EU's borderscape strategy served as a laboratory for borderscape practices in general. As externalisation is a crucial element in controlling the population and the European border regime, its policymaking is fragile. Despite common general policies, it is based on ad hoc solutions and informal agreements, with specific countries spearheading the establishment of border policies with EU support. Examples include the Barcelona Process of 1995 and the Rabat Process of 2006, in which Spain included Morocco in controlling migration movements, and the Mediterranean Dialogue of 2007, in which Italy included Tunisia and Libya in its pushback practices through agreements. On the other hand, the first cracks in the border regime 'crisis' emerged from the effects of the Arab Spring in 2011. The transitional government in Tunisia, which was established during the Arab Spring, cancelled its agreements with Italy (as Libya did for a time after the start of the civil war), allowing migrant boats to leave its shores unhindered. Around 30,000 Tunisians arrived in Italy, where they were granted visas valid throughout the Schengen zone. In response, France established a border control point in Ventimiglia. This was an example of the third structural element in the creation and re-creation of the border regime: the difference between richer northern European states and poorer southern states, which was primarily seen in the Dublin system during and after the long summer of migration. The failure of the supposedly homogeneous European asylum system was evident as early as 2011, when the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Greece (and Belgium) should be excluded from the Dublin system due to their lack of asylum infrastructure (Hess and Kasparek, 2019).

of asylum seekers in transit zones. In March 2017, Hungary passed a law that lowered the already low daily entry quota and restricted the movement of asylum seekers. At that time, more and more people decided to try their luck by crossing from Serbia to Croatia. Following the autumn of that same year, the route shifted further towards Bosnia and Herzegovina as police violence and pushbacks on the Croatian-Serbian border increased. The start of the route divergence was also marked by the death of Madina Husseinkhel, also known as Madina Hussiny. She and her family of 11, most of whom were children, were pushed back by Croatia towards Serbia. They had to walk along the railway line at night, and Madina fell onto the tracks and was hit by a train. Madina's family had crossed to Croatia and had applied for asylum several times before the incident, but their applications had been rejected (Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020: 36).

With restrictions on national borders and the reshaping of states into buffer zones, the control and violence of the security apparatus were also heightened within their territories. While Serbia did not prevent migrants from entering or leaving the country in 2015, allowing NGOs and activist groups to provide aid, it deployed mixed army and police patrols to secure its borders in mid-July 2016. Just days after deciding to reinforce its borders, Serbia opened the chapters on the judiciary, fundamental rights, justice, and freedom and security in its negotiations with the EU. Despite the efforts to close the borders, the number of people stuck in Serbia was increasing (Beznec et. al., 2016: 56-57). Soon after the closure of the corridor, Serbian authorities launched a crusade against migrants and refugees who were staying outside official camps and sleeping in parks or abandoned buildings. They began forcibly transporting people to official accommodations. In November 2016, food distribution to migrants in the Belgrade municipality was no longer permitted, and assistance facilities were gradually dismantled (Beznec et al., 2016: 59).

Bosnia, meanwhile, did not have the infrastructure capacities to adequately accommodate the number of people who were now stuck there. According to official reports, over 25,000 people entered the country irregularly in 2018 and over 53,000 in a two-year period, while the official accommodation capacity in autumn 2018 was just over 400, forcing many to remain outside state-provided accommodation. Activist groups, international organisations, and especially local people themselves provided aid, but the state began introducing more restrictive policies, such as preventing people from living in private accommodation. At Velečevo, the police set up a road checkpoint at the entrance to the canton, where around 7000 people were stopped and forced to find their way back to Sarajevo after being removed from buses or cars. As there were not enough national accommodation facilities, makeshift camps sprang up and new centres were established through international cooperation, such as the IOM. Activists

and journalists reported that the conditions were relatively poor, which can be mostly attributed to the fact that these centres were meant as a temporary solution (Stojić Mitrović et al, 2020: 88-92).

Yet the underlying denominator of all these practices seems to be EU policies and accession negotiations. Through the Stabilisation and Association Process, which aligns legislation with that of the EU, the so-called Western Balkan states had to take certain measures to become closer to EU membership. These measures also include migration policies that limit the migration of citizens of Western Balkan states and address transit irregular migration. At the EU-Western Balkan states meeting in Sofia in 2018, for instance, control over migration movements was one of the predominant conditions for visa liberalisation. All of these states signed the 2018 *Global Compact for Migration*; all except Kosovo signed an agreement with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex); all collaborate with the European Agency for Asylum and are involved in police cooperation activities and other institutional adaptations. These policies are, to a substantial degree, shaped by the EU, whose cooperation increased in 2018 and onwards (Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020: 25-26).

The European Union also financed the Croatian police when it was practicing systematic pushbacks accompanied by brutal police violence. Until 2020, Croatia received 149 million euros for migration management and border control (European Commission, 2020). A small amount was also allocated to establish border officer supervision in response to increased reports of violence against migrants. However, this was not implemented at the time, and the European Commission attempted to conceal its absence (The Guardian, 2020). Although the mechanism was introduced in 2021, the existence of pushbacks was still either denied or downplayed, with only a few cases mentioned (BVMN, 2022: 21-22). Following the closure of the Balkan corridor, the Western Balkan states also militarised their borders. In 2020, in addition to Serbia, Montenegro, and Slovenia deployed the military to guard their borders. North Macedonia continued to deploy the army on the borders in 2019, while the Visegrad Group (Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia), as well as Croatia and Austria, sent police officers to support the Macedonian and Serbian authorities. Joint operations and border checks were established in Albania, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina with the help of European institutions (Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020: 29).

The practice of pushbacks in all its forms has been present at borders before 2015 and was also extensively used during the corridor period, especially after the introduction of the selection criteria. With an increase in irregular border crossings at the Croatian border after 2017 and at the Slovenian border after 2018, the practice of pushbacks in these countries became systematic and

was organised by top officials. In Slovenia, pushbacks were carried out through the readmission agreement and in cooperation with the Croatian police at border checkpoints. In 2018, the main route in the northern Balkans ran from the northwest of Bosnia and Herzegovina across Croatian territory to Slovenia. People would begin their journey in Bosnian cities such as Bihać or Velika Kladuša and enter Croatia irregularly. Walking across Croatia to Slovenia could take from several days to one week or more. People would go deep into the forest to hide from the police, as being caught would mean a violent deportation to Bosnia. After entering Slovenia and running out of supplies, the majority of people crossing were apprehended by Slovenian police. In the municipality of Črnomelj, the number of people irregularly crossing the border was increasing as the pushback practice was quietly introduced. In June 2018, the number of people, who have expressed intention to seek asylum in Slovenia, suddenly dropped drastically although the number of people crossing the border irregularly was increasing (Infokolpa, 2019: 4).² According to deported individuals, police officers were falsifying official procedures at police stations to categorise them as economic migrants seeking work opportunities in Europe rather than as asylum seekers. This way, they could be processed as illegals and readmitted to Croatia under a bilateral agreement. In this way, pushbacks were carried out under the guise of readmission. This meant the fast-track deportation of tens, or even hundreds of people in a day, as in the case of the mass expulsion in Ilirska Bistrica in 2019 (Infokolpa, 2019: 11). The Croatian police would then accept the readmission, carry out a transfer at the border checkpoint, and forcibly deport individuals across the green border into Bosnia and Herzegovina. From the introduction of pushbacks in 2018 to their cessation in mid-2022, more than 30,000 people were readmitted from Slovenia to Croatia (Žagar et al. 2024, 50).

Pushbacks from Croatia to Bosnia and Herzegovina or Serbia were and are still done mostly through forced deportation across the green border. In 2022, rough estimations by BVMN (Border Violence Monitoring Network) were that around 20,000 people per year were victims of pushbacks from Croatia to Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro (BVMN, 2022: 238). Despite denials from heads of state, the practice of pushback became increasingly evident as police officers were caught on video performing pushbacks several times (The Guardian, 2018; Lighthouse reports, 2021). In the name of the policy of deterrence, the Croatian police have been using beatings, humiliation, dog attacks, destruction of property, sexual violence, detentions, and even mock executions when

2 According to official police reports, the proportion of individuals indicating their intention to seek asylum in the vicinity of the Črnomelj police station decreased from 98% in May 2018 to 3% in June 2018. Those apprehended for irregular border crossing and not accepted into the asylum procedure were readmitted to Croatia.

conducting pushbacks (BVMN, 2022: 238–243). Despite clear evidence of brutal police violence by Croatian police in 2020, the practice of chain pushbacks stretched from Italy and Austria, across Slovenia, and on to Croatia, ending in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The pushbacks from Italy and Austria to Slovenia were carried out through readmission. They were eventually halted after courts in Rome (InfoMigrants, 2021) and Graz (Noyan, 2021) found the returns to Slovenia illegal due to the possibility of further deportation to Croatia. The practice of pushbacks transformed the whole region into a deadly zone as people on the move were forced to stay longer on the route, go deeper in the forests, and cross rivers at dangerous spots to avoid being caught by police, which would very likely mean a beating, destroyed phones, loss of money, and a deportation across the border. Due to high stakes, the risk of repetition, and radically asymmetrical relations, the crossing of the borders colloquially became known as *the game* among migrants and volunteers. Finishing *the game* meant avoiding detection by police, following the rules (sufficient preparation), and eventually entering Italy. Losing *the game* meant being deported back to Bosnia and Herzegovina and having to try again (Mucko et al., 2022).

The previous linear Balkan route became the Balkan Circuit because the Western Balkan states became a buffer zone, and EU borders were restricted through violent pushbacks and controls. Crossing the Balkan Route often meant being stuck in camps or at borders for months or even years. If the crossing was unsuccessful, the person would be fast-tracked for deportation, losing their resources and being forced to try again. The circularity of the route also meant that people would travel across the Balkans in both directions, either seeking temporary shelter and resources, being forcibly relocated to camps across the region, or seeking better opportunities for a successful crossing.

While the path forward was being stemmed, the number of people coming to the Western Balkan states increased significantly. The number of people arriving from Greece to Albania increased by 25% from 2017 to 2018, the number of asylum request in Kosovo rose by 300%, number of irregular border crossings in North Macedonia rose from 2831 in 2017 to 16,895 in 2018, while Montenegro registered a rise due to the shift of the route via the coastal pathway through Albania, Montenegro, and Bosnia (Stojić Mitrović et al, 2020: 27). At the same time, the topography changed: European Commission report for North Macedonia in 2019 considered around 32,500 people irregularly crossed borders in both directions since 2018, Montenegro accepted 704 third nationals through readmissions in 2018, mainly from Bosnia. And in 2018, chain pushbacks rose significantly and have since been practised systematically (Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020: 26–27). These routes did not become circular solely because of their geography. Along with people who were now stuck before the Croatian and Hungar-

ian border and were mostly circulating, trying to find different routes back and around, circularity encompassed the practices and discourse of people on the move as well as the border regime:

Circular transit is, therefore, the dominant form of migration movements in the region as people look for a way out. However, migrants are not the only ones circulating in the WB: practices, discourses, knowledges, technologies, even particular narratives, organizations and individual professionals are also following the changed topography. (Stojić and Vilenica, 2019: 8)

In 2019, after the supposed 2015 crisis, another crisis emerged. Covid-19 policies restricted the movements of most citizens and, of course, offered a dispositive for further restricting migration. And even though during the pandemic different solidarity practices also emerged (in Serbia, the emphasis on social media enabled people on the move to share the conditions they were in and made their situation more visible), in most of the Western Balkan states, the measures were similar and in line with the xenophobic discourses that were already prevalent at the time. In Serbia, the state imposed a total ban on the movement of migrants who were confined to the camps, guarded by the army, into which civil organisations were not allowed to enter. As the camps did not have adequate sanitary conditions, people inside were protesting but the camp authorities reacted with methods like beatings, tear gassing migrants, and forced relocation. Similarly, the state and cantonal authorities in Bosnia closed the reception centres, leaving more than 5,500 people locked in overcrowded centres with limited food, water, and healthcare (Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020: 67, 85).

While Croatia did impose restrictions, such as building a fence around the asylum centre in Zagreb, at the start of the pandemic, the Ministry of the Interior announced that it would not take any punitive measures envisaged by the Aliens Act against people who cannot leave Croatia within the time limit prescribed by Schengen rules (in less than 90 days). That is not to say that the violence on the border in Croatia also decreased; if anything, the pushbacks became more violent. They were still, however, a form of violence that the authorities wanted to keep silent, while in Serbia, control of movement became a spectacle. However, the different topographies of control were crucially determined by each country's role in relation to the European border regime. Croatia, as an EU member state, implemented outward border controls, while Serbia, as a non-EU member state, practised inward border controls.

The distinctive appearances of these measures in Croatia and Serbia create unequal borderscapes with specific but mutually supporting roles. While both function as the gates of the EU, Croatia represents an internal space, from which the unwanted people are repelled outside the EU. Serbia represents an outer space, an antechamber where people are forced to stay while trying to enter the EU. (Hameršak and Stojić Mitrović, 2023: 205)

And while Slovenia also passed more restrictive laws regarding the movement of asylum seekers, who were no longer able to move freely from municipality to municipality, the pushback practices in its strategy mainly remained the same. The main difference was that chain pushbacks from Italy to Slovenia (and from Slovenia to Croatia) became more prevalent, and the Centre for Foreigners in Veliki Otok near Postojna played a more crucial role. Because of the change in government, when the right-wing, pro-Orbán party of Janez Janša took power, it sought to implement a pushback model, with detention centres playing a key role. Because of this political decision, together with increased readmissions from Italy, the detention centre near Postojna became overcrowded, and migrants inside were put in caged containers in an abandoned factory hall inside the perimeter of the centre. Due to worsening conditions, the enclosed migrants organised a protest alongside activist groups (RTV MMC, 2020). The practice of mass detention was not long-lived, and the old strategy of pushbacks directly from the police station on the border was put back in place.

The Balkan Route after 2022: Perspective from Slovenia

The practice of pushbacks from Slovenia to Croatia, according to the publicly available data and testimonies of people on the move, stopped around mid-2022. Considering the level of systemic violations of fundamental rights, including cross-border police cooperation, the reduction of pushbacks, at least in part of the Balkan Route, represents an important change in the development of border management and migration in the region.

Considering the reasons that led Slovenian police to stop the pushbacks, we could list several. One of the most relevant was a break in international cooperation between states, as Croatian police became less willing to accept readmissions from Slovenia from February 2022 onward (PIC, 2022). In spring 2022, a new centre-left government took office, and in June 2022, Tatjana Bobnar became the Minister of Interior. In 2018, she was one of the key persons as the

deputy and then a Director General of Slovenian Police in signing directives to police stations that led to systemic refusal of the right to asylum and practice of chain-pushbacks (Infokolpa, 2019: 5). When taking up the office of the Ministry of Interior in 2022, it seems she had a change of heart and issued new directives to police stations, instructing that each person who expressed an intention to seek asylum be treated individually. Common practice at police stations during the pushbacks was to conduct collective interviews and falsify data to classify the person as *illegal*. While the directives were not made public, the Ministry noted them in the media, and they correlate with the drop in readmissions (Žagar et al., 2024: 49). Another important development was a ruling of the Higher Court of Slovenia, which recognised a violation of the fundamental rights of an asylum seeker who was denied asylum in Slovenia and was chain pushed back to Bosnia and Herzegovina on several occasions. The court also recognized the systemic nature of these violations (Infokolpa and BVMN, 2021). Not without effect was also the further expansion of the Schengen Zone, as Croatia was accepted in 2023, which pushed border externalisation further south.

Even though it is difficult to attribute reasons that lead to certain shifts in border policies, it helps us to understand the route as a changing practice of a series of actors including state and international border management apparatus, variety of civil society organisations on both international and local levels, and people on the move who keep crossing borders and challenging the system that enforces them. The movement itself must be counted as a major factor in its own right. In 2022, the number of people moving on the route kept rising, as Slovenian police apprehended 32,024 people for irregular border crossings, a figure triple that of the year before. Despite the increase in crossings, the number of readmissions fell (Žagar et al., 2024: 50). In 2022, Slovenian police conducted 2,169 readmissions to Croatia, mostly in the first half of the year. From 2022 to 2024, more than 100,000 people were apprehended by police for irregular border crossing, and the number of readmissions fell drastically³ (Slovenian Police, 2025). It seems that, due to the number of crossings, the policy of pushbacks became unviable, and Slovenian policy shifted from restriction to facilitation of movement. This meant that persons caught for irregular border crossings with Croatia were allowed to enter the asylum procedure and were not pushed back, enabling onward transit to other countries. During the same period in Croatia, the police began increasingly issuing a document colloquially known as a *seven-day paper* to individuals caught crossing the border irregularly deep inside the territory. This document is given to individuals illegally staying in Croatia and

3 In 2023, Slovenia conducted 176 readmissions, whereas in 2024, there were only 84 to Croatia.

requires them to leave the EU within seven days. This temporary decriminalisation of movement allowed an increased number of people to transit the area hidden in plain sight, forming a sort of “*shadow corridor*” (Hameršak, 2023), which enabled people on the move to take the western route across Slovenia to Italy, hidden in forests without being caught by Slovenian police.

In response to increased arrivals and abandoning the pushback practice, the Slovenian Ministry of the Interior adopted a different strategy to create conditions that made Slovenia a place where asylum seekers could not stay. When a person is caught for irregular border crossing and expresses an intention to seek asylum, he is taken to the asylum camp in Ljubljana, which is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior. Before a person officially asks for asylum, he has some time before the interview with a ministry official, which marks the beginning of the asylum procedure. Many decide to leave the country before their official interview rather than risk lengthy procedures that are likely to end in a negative decision. For those who chose to stay, Slovenia adopted an unofficial policy of mass issuing of Dublin return decisions to Croatia despite clear evidence of violations against asylum seekers by police and inadequate asylum system and housing conditions. In 2023, the Slovenian Ministry of the Interior received 4,389 asylum requests and, in response, issued 4096 decisions on Dublin deportations to Croatia (Opačić, 2025). Persons receiving the Dublin decision can appeal such a decision with the help of legal advisers provided by the state, but the message of this policy was clear. The purpose was to make Slovenia an unwelcoming country and force people into illegality to seek safety and livelihoods elsewhere. Despite this policy, several protests were organised, as many of those facing deportation already had jobs in Slovenia and had become part of local communities (RTV MMC, 2025). Persons receiving the Dublin decision in many cases chose to leave the country and not risk deportation, which shows that the policy of mass issuing of Dublin decisions is, in reality, an unofficial policy of enforcing transitory conditions for migration. An asylum seeker may pass but cannot stay. Despite the large number of Dublin decisions in Slovenia, the actual deportations to Croatia are low. In 2023, Croatia received 897 transfers mostly from Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and France (Croatian Law Centre 2025). Deportations to Croatia from other EU countries have increased in recent years, forcing more and more people into conditions of illegality and circular movement across the EU. There have nonetheless been some positive developments regarding the right to stay in Slovenia in 2025. One example is the legislative introduction of a possibility for asylum seekers to transition to migrant worker residency status under certain conditions (Foreigners Act, see article 34 and article 37).

The development of the Balkan Route, changes in border policies, and the movement of people demonstrate the persistence of migration across the Balkans. Despite very violent efforts to stem irregular migrations through pushbacks, forcing people to cross borders repeatedly, to be detained, robbed, and beaten, the movement continues to form new connections and relations of solidarity. Reflecting on the past years of the Balkan Route shows that the strength of the movement, in parallel with efforts of grass-root civil organising of protests, media actions, and legal advocacy⁴, at least in part and for a time, dismantled the infrastructural and political possibilities of mass deportations and brutal violence that were present in the years before. While the movement remains clandestine and hidden, the reality of the Balkan Route has changed significantly compared to the years between 2018 and 2022, when pushbacks were systemic across several borders, and for many, the Route became an entrapment zone that could last for years.

Conclusion

Migrations across the Balkans have a long and diverse history, and the movement of people and goods presents a fundamental part of this geographical area, situated at the crossroads between continents and major political zones. The fate of such spaces is constant, persistent movement, both regulated and irregular. The origin of the term Balkan Route lies in the externalisation of EU border management practices to the peripheries, as a new *modus operandi* for controlling and deterring irregular migration. Within the EU border regime, the Balkan Route represents a *borderscape*, a region-wide zone, which extends control of movement across national territories to enforce an institutional network whose role is to separate regular and irregular movement, to detect and detain, to apprehend and deport those without the legal rights to move. But it seems that reducing the Balkan Route to nothing more than an invention of the EU's border externalisation practices does not do justice to the history of migration across the Balkans. The route itself is just as much defined by those who refuse

4 The practice of pushbacks at national borders was scrutinised in several states across the Balkan route, with Croatia and Greece facing legal action at the European Court of Human Rights. The mass collection of pushback testimonies from organisations such as No Name Kitchen and the Border Violence Monitoring Network led to several successful advocacy campaigns, achieving the goal of preventing officials from denying the existence of the informal and criminal policy of pushbacks. Many of these testimonies are collected in the Black Book of Pushbacks, which contains 1,633 testimonies relating to more than 25,000 people (BVMN, 2022).

to submit to movement restrictions imposed on them. In global capitalist economies, borders serve as mechanisms of division, separating global centres of power from peripheries that are sources of wealth extraction and cheap migrant labour. Distribution of the right to move is a reflection of global hierarchies based on a system of unequal exchange. Moving across borders without rights thus represents an act of resistance against a system that imposes and depends on such inequalities. The Balkan Route, in these relations, presents itself as a contested space, where borders are not static but respond to directions, tactics, and strategies used by people on the move and are constantly transformed.

At times, the border regimes fail in comparison to the strength of those who cross borders without the right. Such was the case with the Balkan Corridor of 2015–2016, when states were forced to allow the entry and passage of mass movements of people. National and EU authorities eventually formed and took control of the corridor, enabling its closure. To prevent a repetition of the corridor, the border regime implemented policies of excessive violence in the form of mass detention and containment (hotspots), mass incarceration (redefinition of legislation on smuggling), and fast-track collective deportations (pushbacks), which transformed the Balkan Route from a transit zone to a place of forced circular movement. Both the period of the corridor and its closure with expansion and brutalisation of police violence across borders are points in time of a developing struggle defined by the movement of people without the right to move against a system that imposes the division of legal and illegal movement.

The border and migration regimes are therefore not an expression of the absolute power of nation states, but arise on the basis of constant power struggles and negotiations between numerous actors, while mobility struggles and practices are constitutive of them [...] Excessive and unauthorized practices of mobility, which challenge and subvert attempts to harness and restrain it, are thus an expression of another power, on the basis of which we can conceive of an (anti)hegemonic political project. (Kurnik, 2019: 18)

As a building block of Fortress Europe, the Balkan Route represents an early experimental territory for the externalisation practices of the EU border regime to control irregular migration at its peripheries. As a contested territory, the Balkan Route becomes a place of resistance, of hope, and struggle against global systemic inequalities replicated in imposed travel restrictions. Against this movement of resistance, a regime is mobilised to control it, to stem and to deter it, a regime that divides legal from illegal, wanted from unwanted, separating

permitted existence by determining others to non-existence, to invisibility and hiding. The Balkan Route as form of resistance is an expression of perseverance in invisibility, in walking the never-ending forests, climbing the bus undercarriages, and enduring detentions. Same perseverance at times breaks the mechanisms that determine it to silence, forcing its way into the open, breaking the borders, and setting the stage anew.

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