



1506
UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI URBINO
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Department of Economics, Society, Politics

Ph.D. PROGRAMME IN: GLOBAL STUDIES. ECONOMY, SOCIETY AND LAW

CYCLE XXXVIII

From Region to Route.

An Ethnography of Solidarity Infrastructure along the Western Balkan Route

ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES:

GSPS-05/A - General Sociology

GSPS-06/A - Sociology of Cultural and Communication Processes

GSPS-08/B - Sociology of Environment and Territory

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ACADEMIC YEAR
2024/2025

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My deepest gratitude goes to all those who made this research possible. In particular, to the participants in the study – the staff members of the NGOs I collaborated with, as well as those from other organisations I came into contact with. With many of them, the relationship went beyond the interview itself, developing into lasting connections. I am grateful for their generosity in opening up and sharing their experiences during the interviews, as well as for their curiosity and active engagement with this research project. As often happens, many ideas and insights emerged from informal conversations in cafés or during volunteering hours within the associations.

I am grateful to Professor Eduardo Barberis from the University of Urbino for his role as supervisor and for having guided me with attention, commitment and genuine engagement throughout these three years. I would also like to thank Professor Luca Giliberti from the University of Parma, who, as co-supervisor, showed great interest in my work and supported me through the various stages of the research. My thanks also go to Marijana Hameršak, my point of reference during my visiting period at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research in Zagreb. At the Institute, I found a wonderful environment open to exchange and collaboration.

Through solidarity networks and local mobilisation in my city, I forged valuable connections with Chiara Marchetti and Jacopo Anderlini, whom I thank for carrying forward with me the counter-mapping project “Stuck in Transit”, as well as for the discussions and feedback on my work. My thanks also go to my fellow PhD colleagues in “Global Studies. Economy, Society and Law” at the University of Urbino – in particular Ounour, Davide, Denis, and Sara – who made these years of research less solitary and with whom I shared ideas, support, conferences, and friendship.

A special thank you goes to my family and friends, who have always supported and showed interest throughout these years of research. I am especially grateful to my family – Giovanna, Giuseppe, and Lorenzo – and to my lifelong friends Mattia, Matteo, and Giulia. Alongside them, I wish to thank my extended family for their constant encouragement, curiosity about the themes explored in this research, and their closeness – also in a political sense.

Finally, but by no means least, my heartfelt thanks go to Giulia, for choosing to be my life partner and for the unwavering support she has given me during these years of research, especially throughout my year abroad. Together, we bridged the distance through listening and sharing our lives, always supporting one another with patience and care.

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AMIF	Asylum and Migration Fund
AYS	Are You Syrious?; Croatian NGO publishing reports on the situation in the country.
BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
BMVI	Border Management and Visa Instrument
BVMN	Border Violence Monitoring Network
CARDS	Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilisation
CLC	Croatian Law Center; Croatian NGO publishing reports on the situation in the country.
EU	European Union
FRY	Federal Republic of Yugoslavia
Frontex	European Border and Coast Guard Agency
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IEBL	Inter-Entity Boundary Line
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework
NFIs	Non-Food Items
SFA	Service for Foreigners' Affairs; Administrative unit of the Bosnian Ministry of Security.
SFRY	Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia
SAA	Stabilisation and Association Agreement
SAP	Stabilisation and Association Process
SIS	Schengen Information System
UNHCR	United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees
USC	Una-Sana Canton; One of the ten cantons constituting the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.
WB	Western Balkan
WB6	Western Balkan Six; The six Western Balkan countries participating in the Berlin Process.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates the transformations of the Western Balkan route as both an object of governance and a lived, contested space shaped by practices of solidarity. Since the summer of 2015, the route has become a key site where European border externalisation, regional cooperation, and local forms of resistance intersect. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted between October 2023 and November 2024 in Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Zagreb (Croatia), this dissertation explores the ever-changing nature of the route by juxtaposing the macro and micro scales of analysis. To this aim, the discussion is structured around three key concepts – scales, borders, and infrastructures – which illuminate the tensions between the macro- and micro-social dynamics shaping the route.

At the macro level, the research analyses how the Western Balkan route has been constructed as an object of governance through securitarian discourses embedded in the EU accession process. By examining cooperation frameworks, funding mechanisms, and policy instruments, it shows how the borders of the Schengen area have become increasingly blurred, incorporating non-EU states such as Bosnia and Herzegovina into the European migration governance model.

At the micro level, the dissertation investigates solidarity actors operating in urban contexts outside institutional reception systems, supporting migrants' presence and mobility. It argues that these initiatives, while non-confrontational, articulate a significant critique of the institutional governance models through infrastructures that facilitate the circulation of goods, information and practices.

Ultimately, the dissertation demonstrates that the Western Balkan route is a space of tension: on the one hand, a geopolitical construct of multi-scalar governance aimed at controlling and illegalising migrant mobility and criminalising solidarity initiatives; on the other, a lived space where encounters and relationships are forged, giving rise to solidaristic practices that uphold dignity and guarantee access to rights. The cases of Sarajevo and Zagreb illustrate how everyday encounters between solidarity actors and migrants play a crucial role in identifying and deconstructing the proliferation of borders along the route.

INTRODUCTION

During the long summer of migration in 2015, approximately one million people arrived in Greece and, from there, traversed the Balkans, primarily seeking to reach Austria, Germany, and Sweden. While the so-called Balkan route did not originate in those months, it notably re-emerged from what has been described as a state of “shadow and invisibility” (Hess, Kasperek, 2022). From that point onwards, the space encompassed by this migration corridor underwent significant transformations. These were shaped both by institutional migration management policies and by the strategies employed by migrants themselves, which frequently allowed them to circumvent the security apparatus designed to monitor and control their mobility. Within these territories, numerous acts of solidarity emerged in collaboration with migrants, facilitating access to essential goods and services while supporting the recognition and assertion of their rights.

Building on this historical and geopolitical context, this research project examines the Western Balkan route, focusing on the tension between approaches that treat the route primarily as an object of governance (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias, 2019) and those that, from a bottom-up perspective, view it as an inhabited space and a site of claims-making (Queirolo Palmas, Rahola, 2020; Giliberti, 2024). Employing an ethnographic methodology, the study juxtaposes the microsocial scale – through everyday observations within local NGOs and the biographies of staff members – with the macro scale, which considers processes of regionalisation and the construction of the Western Balkans within the broader framework of European Union accession process.

This dissertation is guided by two central research questions, addressing the route at distinct but interrelated scales. At the regional (macro) level, the focus is on the governance of the route. In this regard, the research asks: how has the Western Balkan route been constructed as an object of governance? How do discursive frameworks, cooperation agreements, and funding mechanisms –

particularly those embedded in the EU accession process – shape the policies and technologies implemented by states and partners along the route? What implications do these governance processes have for migrants’ mobility and for local and transnational solidarity initiatives? The hypothesis discussed is that the Western Balkan route has been constructed as an object of governance through securitarian discourses emerging within the process of EU border externalisation, framed by notions of “crisis” and “emergency”. As a result, ten years after the summer of migration, similarities in the practices governing migrant mobility and in reception policies between the Schengen Area and non-Schengen countries have blurred the boundaries of the former, effectively positioning Bosnia and Herzegovina within the EU migration governance model. This has consequences for the ways in which civil society mobilised in the two studied contexts. Despite the similarities in reception models, the two cities under study are embedded in different mobility processes: Sarajevo functions primarily as a site for organising onward travel, whereas Zagreb increasingly serves as a place of waiting and return.

At the local (micro) level, the ethnographic study focuses on the practices of solidarity, asking: how do solidarity initiatives operate in urban spaces along the route, and in what ways do they respond to or challenge institutional models of reception and migration management? How can urban solidarity spaces – even when non-confrontational – be read as critiques of governance structures? What forms of action and collaboration emerge both within and beyond the Schengen Area, and how do infrastructures (material and social) facilitate the circulation of goods, information, and practices? The ethnographic chapters suggest that urban solidarity initiatives operate in diverse ways outside institutional reception centres. These practices are shaped by participants’ varying understandings of their work and its political significance. Despite these differences, the initiatives’ non-confrontational character nonetheless functions as a significant critique of institutional models of reception and migration management. Engaging institutions through everyday service provision and collaboration with migrants emerges as a deliberate tactic. Furthermore, the creation of these spaces and the

cooperative efforts between NGOs generate an infrastructure that sustains the field of solidarity, facilitating the circulation of goods, information, and practices across scales.

By articulating the analysis across these scales, the dissertation examines the tensions between top-down governance and bottom-up practices of solidarity, highlighting how institutional logics and everyday actions co-produce the dynamics of the Western Balkan route.

The analysis is structured around three key concepts – scales, borders, and infrastructures – which serve to illuminate the tensions between the macro- and micro-social dynamics shaping the route.

These concepts are crucial to understanding both the institutions’ attempts to govern the route and the actions of solidarity actors who open cracks within the institutional management of migration and build infrastructures that enable the circulation of goods, information, and practices.

The methodology employed is multi-sited ethnography, in which movement between locations simultaneously constitutes a crossing of the Schengen Area border, transitioning from the Western Balkans to the European Union. Fieldwork was conducted between October 2023 and November 2024, during which I participated in NGO activities at each site. The intensity of my engagement varied over time, designating Sarajevo as a “thickly” researched site and Zagreb as a “thinly” researched one (Marcus, 2012), reflecting differences in field access discussed in the methodological chapter. This engagement shaped the focus of the research, providing an in-depth understanding of NGO operations, networks, and practices in these two sites along the route.

Building on the theoretical framework and methodological apparatus, this dissertation is structured through a juxtaposition of scales. At the regional level, the analysis examines the migration route from the long summer of 2015 onward, while subsequent chapters focus on the city scale, exploring everyday life and microsocial dynamics gathered through ethnographic practice. These chapters

highlight the forms of resistance that emerge within – and despite – this space of governance and control.

In this regard, Chapter Three does not merely provide contextual background; rather, its aim is to sharpen a critique of how the space of the route has been constructed within broader security and control logics governing migrants’ (im)mobility. This critique begins by examining institutional discourse and cooperation between EU member states and accession countries, before turning to the local “battleground” (Dimitriadis et al., 2021; Ambrosini, 2023) of everyday life, where policies are implemented and civil society actors develop new practices and alternative models.

The ethnographic chapters present case studies that illuminate the specificities of the two urban areas as expressed through the voices of research participants. The two cities belong to distinct macro-regions – one within the Western Balkans and the other within the European Union – creating notable differences, despite the commonalities observed in the provision of reception services within otherwise inhospitable infrastructures. Drawing on the perspectives of individuals working in local and international NGOs, the dissertation addresses two key aspects: the role of the city along the route, and the creativity and determination of those who have actively established spaces of support, encounter, and distribution for migrants in transit or (temporarily) residing in these urban areas.

CHAPTER ONE

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework guiding the analysis of the dissertation. Three key concepts – scales, borders, and infrastructures – are employed as an analytical matrix, highlighting their entanglements and mutual influences. At an operational level, this research engages with three sets of dynamics: first, the production of spaces, which may function as sites of repression and control or, alternatively, as arenas of encounter and alliance; second, the multiplication of borders within society, a process that produces marginalisation but is simultaneously challenged by grassroots practices seeking to reconfigure the ‘us/them’ divide; and third, the infrastructural dimension of the route, understood both as mechanisms that enable the implementation of migration and border governance policies, and as channels through which knowledge, information, and material resources circulate, allowing those same borders to be circumvented.

This chapter addresses the three concepts in the first three sections, examining each in turn within the broader debates on migration, solidarity, and the urban question. The fourth section then brings the concepts together to offer a critical reading of the top-down construction of the migration route as an object of governance, but also to analyse the bottom-up tactics employed by activists and NGOs staff members to create counter-spaces of encounter in which migrants, locals, and internationals forge alliances to assert the right to freedom of movement for all.

1. Scaling the route

Conceptualising scale

Scale constitutes a central analytical category within debates in human geography and is increasingly mobilised in scholarship that bridges urban research and the study of migration. In this section, I will focus on the concept’s different nuances, highlighting its value in investigating complex social

entanglements. Space production is a key process that will be further explored throughout the dissertation. Regarding this, the discussion of ‘scale’ in human geography reflects a broader focus on ‘socio-spatial’ dynamics, which can be understood “as an interest in how social phenomena are inextricably linked to the construction and use of space” (Papanastasiou, 2017, p. 41).

Contributions from authors in the field of critical urban and political geography (Swyngedouw, 1997, 2004; Brenner, 2001a, 2001b) help us to frame scales as products of socio-spatial relations. Swyngedouw’s (1997, p. 140) analysis highlights that the construction of space is not given *a priori* and, as such, cannot be “socially or politically neutral, but embodies and expresses power relationships”. In other words, for the author, scalar configurations that arise from the power relations surrounding a specific social process “become arenas around which socio-spatial power choreographies are enacted and performed” (Swyngedouw, 2004, p. 5). This arena is not bounded to a specific spatial scale, whether local or supranational, but “weaves a network that is always simultaneously deeply localised and extends its reach over certain scales, and certain spatial surfaces” (ibid., p. 27). In this spatial conceptualisation, concrete geographies “are etched into these ecological, social, political or institutional scalar configurations” (ibid., p. 28).

Brenner (2001a), drawing on the studies of Swyngedouw and Cox (1998), offers a heterodox Marxist interpretation of urbanisation and further refines the concept of the ‘politics of scale’. The author focuses on the preposition ‘of’, which, in its plural meaning refers to the “the production, reconfiguration or contestation of particular differentiations, orderings and hierarchies among geographical scales. In this plural aspect, the word ‘of’ connotes not only the production of differentiated spatial units as such, but also, more generally, their embeddedness and positionalities in relation to a multitude of smaller or larger spatial units within a multitiered, hierarchically configured geographical scaffolding” (ibid., p. 600).

The author highlights that the processes of scalar structuration are constantly being reshaped through “social routines and struggles”. Indeed, focusing on structuration convey centrality to a “developmental dynamic in which the basic structures of collective social action are continually reproduced, modified and transformed through collective social action” (ibid., p. 604-605). The burgeoning debate among scale theorists have animated the analysis on globalisation, exploring the repositioning of different localities with regard to “globe-spanning hierarchies of economic and political power” (Schiller, 2009, p. 21) within a broader understanding of the global and local as “mutually constitutive” (Brenner, 2001b, pp. 134-135).

While Swyngedouw and Brenner stress scale’s material and hierarchical dimensions, post-structuralist geographers problematise the rhetorical use of scale categories. Among them, Jones (1998, p. 27) frames scales as ‘epistemological category’ conceiving it as a “representational trope a way of framing political-spatiality that in turn has material effects”. This claim drives the author to the conclusion that “if scale is a trope, then we can no longer see it as neutral or transparent in *how* it represents. Every trope carries with it its own rhetoric, its own ability to shape the meaning of space” (ibid.), adding that “as epistemology scale may be intimately linked to our knowledge of power and space. And, as a concept, it will also be contextualized both socio-culturally and historically” (ibid., p. 28). By approaching the concept from an epistemological perspective, attention shifts to discursive practices and their translation into policies, which in turn produce effects on people’s everyday lives.

However, it is important to remember that scales are not the only tool for analysing socio-spatial relations. Jessop et al. (2008, p. 396) propose a multidimensional matrix built around four socio-spatial dimensions: territory, place, scale, and network (TPSN), considered both as ‘structuring principles’ and as ‘fields of operation’. The outcome of these overlaps is “that structuring principles do not just apply to themselves – the route to mutually isolated forms of one-dimensionalism – and

that more complex concepts can be developed by considering how different structuring principles impact other fields of sociospatial relations” (ibid.). For the authors, an application of this matrix:

“would entail using it to decipher the strategies and tactics of individual and collective agents, organizations, and institutions that are engaged in contentious politics, as they perceive them as participants. In this manner, the TPSN schema could provide a basis for deciphering the variegated, polymorphic spaces of contention that have been produced through different types of social mobilization in different historical–geographical contexts” (Jessop et al., 2008, p. 398).

In this dissertation, the non-contentious politics enacted by solidarity actors is examined within the contemporary “geo-history” (Paasi, 2009) of the Western Balkans – first as a region and later as a ‘route’. Sarajevo and Zagreb, the two research sites, are approached as polymorphic spaces transformed by the tension between multi-scalar institutional migration governance and the multifaceted, interconnected realm of solidarity. Scalar structuration is understood as inseparable from power relations (Brenner, 2001a), shaped by policy agendas and social processes, and enacted through what Swyngedouw (2004) conceptualises as “choreographies of power”. While these theoretical perspectives illuminate how scale is produced and contested, this dissertation advances an understanding of scales as simultaneously discursive and practice-based. In the context of the Western Balkans, this means analysing how EU border and migration management policies situate the region within a wider geopolitical hierarchy, while also tracing how solidarity actors mobilise scale categories in everyday practices to form alliances with migrants, open spaces, articulate demands, and reconfigure socio-spatial relations. When the analytical lens shifts from contemporary capitalism to the governance of irregularised migration, scalar dynamics become particularly relevant in the position assumed by the Balkan states since the ‘long summer of migration’ in 2015 – a role that Beznec et al. (2020, p. 41) characterise as a “colonial relation in the subordinate position of local (Balkan) powers in charge of restoring the European border regime on behalf of EU core states and powers.”

Thus, the macro-social dimension of route governance and EU accession is placed in tension with the micro-social and discreet practices of de-bordering. The route as an ‘object of policy’ (Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias, 2022) is reframed at the city’s scale as a battleground (Dimitriadis et al., 2021). For this reason, at an operational level and through the ethnographic method, this research sheds lights on the struggles of solidarity actors with empirical insights from the everyday experiences of the research participants.

It is precisely this everyday scale, emerging from the ethnographical practice, that makes possible the analysis of the participants’ *scalar projects and practices*; in other words: “what people do with scale categories, how they utilize them to construct space and social relations for specific political aims” (Moore, 2008, p. 217). Moore proposes to reverse the terms of reasoning, instead of investigate ‘*practices occurring at different scale*’, the suggestion is to shift the orientation toward the ‘*scalar dimension of practices*’. Building on Goffman’s ‘frame analysis’ and selected literature on social movements, the author claims that through this inversion it is possible to “investigate how actors utilize scale categories to spatially ‘frame’ problems and solutions, include or exclude certain actors, legitimate political projects, rework relations of power and coalesce political processes around particular scalar orders” (ibid., p. 218).

This dissertation adopts Moore’s practice-based perspective while retaining the structuralist insight that scale is entangled with power relations. The “route” is conceptualised as an arena of tension between, on one side, institutional policies mapping migrant trajectories and enforcing mobility governance, and on the other, micro-level forms of resistance emerging from everyday interactions between migrants and solidarity actors. Chapters Three, Four, and Five examine the scalar dimensions of these practices; by analysing how EU border externalisation policies situate the Western Balkans

within a wider geopolitical hierarchy, and, by contrast, how solidarity actors construct their own scales, open spaces, articulate demands, and go beyond the city scale (Schiller, Çağlar, 2009).

City's scale within the Western Balkan route

In migration studies, the concept of scale has often been applied to processes of “incorporation” and settlement in small- and medium-sized cities (Barberis, Pavolini, 2015; Schenkel et al., 2023; Angelucci et al., 2025). This strand of literature, which interweave debates on scale with migration studies, is particularly relevant for analysing the geographical unit in which this research is situated: the city. In this regard, Schiller (2009, p. 16) proposes “a global power perspective” able to avoid the “methodological nationalism” and “that can link contemporary forces of capitalism restructuring to the specific localities within which migrants live and struggle”. The author claims that “After a postmodern period in which any attempt to use or develop globe-spanning perspectives was dismissed as a ‘grand narrative’, scholars in an array of disciplines, and with very different politics, have once again tried to connect the local and particular with an analysis of broader forces” (ibid., p. 16). This aims to connect and trace the relationships between local and global strongly resonate with the aim of this dissertation.

Cities have become privileged sites of analysis due to the challenges associated with the inclusion of newcomers into the urban fabric. A rich body of literature has emerged around the concept of ‘sanctuary cities’: urban centres that reject the implementation of securitised and exclusionary policies issued at different institutional levels (Varsanyi, 2008); as well as ‘cities of refuge’: spaces of encounter and politicisation concerning the right to asylum, which prefigure ‘how the city itself might be harnessed as that political space of rupture within state politics’ (Darling, 2008, p. 20).

Taking part in this debate, which intertwines migration, the urban question, and the production of scales, Brenner (2011, p. 24) proposes narrowing the scope of scalar analysis in relation to migration and the city:

“Concepts of scale, I argue, should not be conflated with those of space, place, territory, or networks. Concomitantly, the churning, polymorphic geographies of urban restructuring and migration processes cannot be conceptualized exclusively in scalar terms. I argue, nonetheless, that scalar concepts have indeed become essential tools for deciphering *some* of the key dimensions of contemporary urban transformation, including those associated with migration flows. More generally, this chapter advocates a shift from discussions of scale as such to the analysis of scalar *processes* – for instance, the scaling and rescaling of urbanization, state regulation, migration, and so forth”.

This dissertation adopts Brenner’s perspective, proposing to examine through the concept of scale *some* processes that characterise the transformation both of the Western Balkan route and of Sarajevo and Zagreb. Thus, situated at the urban scale, the research engages with key questions: how have transit cities been (re)configured by the socio-spatial dynamics produced through migration management policies implemented during the EU accession process? And, also, how are solidarity actors engaging with the ever-changing and polymorphic spatial configurations of the Western Balkan route?

Scaling up from the city to the route, the study of Cobarrubias (2020) is helpful in identifying the entanglements between scales, bordering operations, and infrastructural production along the Western Balkan route. Indeed, “When approaching border externalization, the question of scale stands out given that outsourcing borders entails a process of territorial and administrative expansion of a given state’s migratory policy priorities into other states, what in EU terms are called ‘third countries’” (Cobarrubias 2020, p. 3). The author – analysing the European migration control in North

and West Africa – highlights the contours of the ‘scale of the migratory route’, claiming that “a distinctive, and uneasy scale of border governance is both deployed and contested by multiple actors, where apparently distinct scales of the border are co-produced with and through ‘national’ and ‘regional’ borders” (ibid., p. 2).

Cobarrubias provides five points through which the scale of the “route” is enacted by a plethora of actors and “knowledge/power practices”, via: *i)* the creation of regional forums at intergovernmental level, with delegation of the European Union and non-EU countries involved; *ii)* the role of the international policy development, training, and consulting organizations; *iii)* the production of maps of the route in order to facilitate the coordination and dialogue among the different actors, and to convey a specific narrative on the phenomenon (see also van Houtum and Bueno Lacy 2020); *iv)* the establishment of joint policing and intelligent operations; *v)* the setting up of a stream of funds, usually as aid programme and/or international cooperation projects. For example, when the EU wanted to fund initiatives along the routes it had to create a distinctive budgetary instrument and geography that could facilitate the new “scale” of the route. This scale might “supersede, or superimpose itself on, previous existing regional designations for funding” (ibid., p. 7).

The author’s in-depth analysis of the scale of migration routes across the African continent can be applied to study the accession and regionalisation process that the Western Balkan countries began in early 2000s, over which the route, later, overlapped. This dissertation shed lights on how European institutions, through the IPA funding stream, have mobilised scalar categories to spatially frame both problems (such as irregular migration within IPA beneficiaries) and solutions (including technology and policy transfer). It also involves identifying which actors are included and excluded (or criminalised) as well as reworking “relations of power and coalesce political processes around particular scalar orders” (Moore 2008, p. 218).

Regional and continental migration governance processes, particularly through the criminalisation of migrant mobility, become crystallised at the urban scale. The two research sites, Sarajevo and Zagreb, thus appear as more than mere ‘through’ spaces along the route (Collyer, De Haas, 2012); they emerge instead as ‘crossroads’ (Queirolo Palmas, Rahola, 2020): places of encounters, departures, and arrivals embedded within a stratified history of displacement and integration. Through the voices of the research participants, the two cities are analysed as spaces situated within specific dynamics of mobility and waiting. On the one hand, narratives focus on personal biographies of engagement and the pragmatics of everyday support; on the other, broader dynamics come to the fore, relating to the incorporation of these urban areas into the wider context of the Western Balkan route and processes of EU accession.

2. Border multiplication and the Western Balkan route

Conceptualising borders

For the authors who critically engaged with the border and migration studies, the European space represents a unique viewpoint from which to study the ever-adapting border regime. Balibar (2001, p. 81) writes of “polysemy” and “heterogeneity” of the borders, which means that borders “do not have the same meanings for everyone” (Bauder, 2017, p. 19; quoting Balibar, 2001, p. 81), simultaneously performing “several functions of demarcation and territorialization – between distinct social exchanges or flow, between distinct rights, and so forth” (Mezzadra, Neilson, 2013, p. 4; quoting Balibar, 2002, p. 79). Within this debate, Bauder (2017, p. 31) introduces the dimension of “ambiguity”, highlighting that “borders are always tied to particular uses, practices, and experiences. In this way, border aspects always remain connected to their particular contexts”. As Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) point out, borders “are essential to cognitive processes” because they allow us to structure our thoughts. At the same time, the performative dimension of border – what in practical terms the border does – is deeply linked with the functions that we assign to it; as Bauder (2017, p.

31) claims: “Our imagination of the border also shapes worldly practices associated with it, including people’s cross-border mobility”.

Thus, borders emerge as a complex assemblage, shaped by varying meanings, practices, as well as crossing modes – conceptualised in a way that questions the “vision of the border as a neutral line” (Mezzadra, Neilson, 2013, p. 16). In 2009, Balibar wrote: “The future regime of borders – both in the middle of the European space and at its extremities – is certainly one of the crucial stakes and enigmas of the coming period” (Balibar, 2009, p. 201). Almost two decades after Balibar’s words, this research engages with the enigma of the EU border regime, positioning itself both within and beyond the EU space.

The term ‘border’ is strongly associated with ‘control’ in tangible – although only for someone – operations devoted at surveillance and selection: “Borders do not represent a fixed point in space or time, rather they symbolize a social practice of spatial differentiation” (van Houtum, van Naerssen, 2002, p. 126). Bigo (2014) introduces the concept of the ‘external dimension of internal security’. The (in)securitization 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, p. 213).

In examining borders’ spatial and functional dimensions, Balibar (1998) asserts that “Borders are no longer at the border” (Bauder, 2017, p. 23; quoting Balibar, 1998, pp. 217-218). In this process of border dispersion within the state’s territory (Rumford, 2006), Rumford (2009, pp. 2–3) claims that “bordering, debordering and rebordering are no longer the exclusive business of nation-states, or even of the EU” and that “borderwork is very much the business of citizen, of ordinary people”. The author

argues that “People, not just states, engage in bordering activities” (ibid., p. 5), proposing to look at the everyday micropractices of a wide range of actors.

The context that emerges is one in which the ‘border spectacle’ (De Genova, 2013) becomes dislocated from the territorial frontiers of the state, only to be reproduced and multiplied within them. Macro- and micro-scale bordering practices generate conditions of ‘illegality’ and ‘deportability’, constantly felt and experienced by individuals subjected to this socio-political process of illegalisation (De Genova, 2002; see also BurrIDGE et al., 2017). The contemporary EU migration and border regime (Hess, Kasperek, 2019) is characterised not only by the objective of controlling border porosity (Kasperek, 2016), but also by its distinctive mode of governing mobility through mobility itself (Tazzioli, 2020). As Tsianos et al. (2009, pp. 2–3) argue:

“this post-national process of border displacement and externalization (...) represents a multifaceted constitutive plane of struggles where the regime of mobility control is challenged by the fluid, clandestine, multidirectional, and context-dependent forms of mobility”.

In this regard, the analysis of Hess et al. (2009) offer a valuable opportunity to reflect on the relational dimension of bordering strategies. Indeed, besides the actors involved with their *borderwork* in its *spectacle*, borders are continuously challenged – and thus shaped – by the migrants’ tactics and ability to cross them. Building on this, Mezzadra and Neilson (2013, p. 4) define borders as “social institutions, which are marked by tensions between practices of border reinforcement and border crossing”. Situated within this tension is also the civil society of the territories traversed by migratory routes, which, through alliances, collaborates in shaping migrants’ trajectories. This aspect will be explored in detail in Chapter Four and Five, where the dissertation examines the formation of solidarity initiatives and spaces by locals and internationals in Sarajevo and Zagreb, as well as the alliances forged with migrants during their journeys.

The confrontation between the enacted of freedom of movement – brought forward by migrants – and the apparatus of control, aimed at their containment, takes place daily in the forests (Hameršak, Pleše, 2021), in the Mediterranean and Atlantic Sea (Cuttitta, 2022; Queirolo Palmas, Giliberti, 2024), in urban borderlands (Hromadžić, 2020; Helms, 2023) turning these spaces into ‘hostile environment’(s) (Pezzani, 2019). It is important here to stress that these *battlegrounds* are not solely confined at the state’s geographical borders. Drawing on the literature on borders discussed in this section, this research brings the discussion on bordering and de-bordering processes in Sarajevo and Zagreb.

Situating borders in the Balkan region

Since the 1990s, the debate on borders has taken place mainly in the United States and Europe as part of a critical analysis of policies related to citizenship and mobility control. In Europe, the debate emerged at a pivotal moment in history when two opposing dynamics were converging: on one hand, the implementation of the Schengen Area of free circulation; and on the other, the space of free trade and movement that had existed for over forty years within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) was disintegrating, which “created the first large refugee movement since World War II within Europe” (Hess, Kasperek, 2022, p. 139). While some European states were starting to tear down barriers to free movement, new states were emerging in the southeast, leading to a proliferation of borders within the Balkans (Milivojevic, 2019; see also Stefanov, Radović, 2021; Jansen, 2023).

Situating the following theoretical pages within the Balkan region is important in order to grasp the centrality that the route(s) crossing these territories at different time in history, and follow different trajectories, have had since the 1990s in shaping the European approach to migration and its border regime. In late 1990s, the European border regime emerged as a “fluid assemblage” (Bialasiewicz, 2012) “involving European Union agencies, European legislation, processes of standardisations and

harmonisations – especially around the practices of border management – and a growing military-industrial-academic complex largely funded by the EU” (Hess, Kasperek, 2019, p. 4). Hess and Kasperek (2022, p. 194) in their genealogy of the Balkan route, aptly point out that the Amsterdam Treaty was signed in 1999; from that moment:

“Taken together with the communitarization of migration and asylum policies, the EU had suddenly become territorial, and a securitized preoccupation with migration was at the heart of the new field of Justice and Home Affairs, or, as the Treaty of Amsterdam labeled it, the yet-to-emerge Area of Freedom, Security and Justice”.

It is important to clarify from the outset the historical trajectory of the route. Hameršak (2023) points out that the SFRY, due to its central role in the Non-Aligned Movement, had already become, in the 1960s and 1970s, a space of circulation for people coming from the Global South. The author also dates to 1973 the first four deaths of what would later be conceptualised as the European border regime, which occurred at the Slovenian–Italian border at Boršt/Sant’Antonio in Bosco.¹ Furthermore, as highlighted by Stojić Mitrović et al. (2026), from the 1990s onwards the expression “Balkan route” was used by police forces, humanitarian actors and politicians to designate a trajectory that, alongside the flow of weapons and drugs into Central Europe, became increasingly crossed by people following the dissolution of Yugoslavia. The so-called Balkan route, thus, remained largely confined to specialist discourse until the ‘long summer of migration’ in 2015 (Kasperek, Speer, 2015), when it re-emerged from the “shadows and invisibility” (Hess, Kasperek, 2022). Since those summer months, the role of borders in the relationship between the European Union and the Balkan countries has regained its centrality. Back then, the media attention abruptly shifted from the Mediterranean Sea – with usual images of overcrowded boats – to the Balkans, redirecting the attention towards Keleti and Idomeni train stations as well as on the groups of refugees walking in the Croatian and

¹ M. Hameršak “History of Border Deaths”. 10/06/2023. e-ERIM <https://e-erim.ief.hr/pojam/p-povijest-smrti-na-granicama-p?locale=en>.

Slovenian woods. In those summer months about a million people arrived in Greece and from there, passing through the Balkans, were heading mainly to Austria, Germany and Sweden.

These “disobedient mass mobilities” (Tazzioli, De Genova, 2016) had the ability to disrupt the European border regime for few months. In response to this, countries crossed by migrants’ trajectories opted for a “state-organized transit of people” (Hameršak et al., 2020) 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 et al., 2016, p. 4; see also Beznec et al., 2020). 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 – opened a new phase in the way that the irregularised mobility along the route has been governed. In those months, a massive solidarity mobilization characterised the transit and waiting times of migrants along the Balkan route (Milan, 2019; Hameršak, 2021; Cantat, 2021). Chapter Four and Five will address the daily work of the infrastructure that from below – from two capitals along the route – opens cracks in the dispersed, delocalised (Cobarrubias et al., 2023) and externalised EU border regime.

3. Mobility through infrastructures

This section interrogates the tensions that structure the concept of infrastructure: while enabling movement, connectivity, and circulation, infrastructures simultaneously operate as technologies of regulation and control, governing the direction, management, and pace of mobility. Given the breadth of the term “infrastructure” and the wide range of research strands within this field, there is no single, cohesive sociology or anthropology of infrastructure (see Larkin, 2013; Knox, Gambino, 2023; Borghi, Leonardi, 2024). These socio-technical assemblages are both material and immaterial – they enable and constraint mobility, as:

“Infrastructures are the arteries of our contemporary world: roads, railways, airports, ports, pipelines, fibre optics cables, data, and logistics centres. Built

above and below ground, they connect, channel, and, at times, halt the movement of humans, commodities, and resources that populate the earth” (Knox, Gambino, 2023).

Infrastructures are also inherently relational, as they hold different meanings for different groups: “one person’s infrastructure is another’s topic, or difficulty” (Star, 1999, p. 380). Alongside the historical analysis of the alliance of capitalism and infrastructures, with their technical efficacy in promoting economic development, Larkin (2013, p. 336) introduce an additional layer of inquiry: the poetic mode. This mode is built upon the concept of *aesthesis* that refers to “bodily reaction to lived reality”, an embodied experience “governed by the ways infrastructures produce the ambient conditions of everyday life”. In the “poetic mode”, the aesthetic dimension prevails over the technical one, which “means that form is loosened from technical function. Infrastructures are the means by which a state proffers these representations to its citizens and asks them to take those representations as social facts” (ibid., p. 335).

Once the focus shifts from the connectivity function that has streamlined the circulation of goods to that of human mobility, a context emerges in which states negotiate their role within multi-scalar networks involving supranational institutions and private actors. This perspective allows us to analyse how infrastructures constitute sites of mobility: how they are built and experienced by multiple actors in the form of the ‘route’, but also how they emerge from the everyday interactions between allied subjects, as in the case of the infrastructuring of solidarity initiatives. This approach allows us to uncover the tensions embedded in the processes of temporal and spatial compression and dilation that shape migratory routes.

Indeed, the growing number of actors involved in the construction and maintenance of infrastructures becomes crucial when the *plane of struggles* of human mobility is taken into consideration. In this context, the spatiotemporal function of infrastructure is crucial for analysing migrants’ tactics, as well

as the institutional policies and civil society actions aimed at slowing down, halting, or supporting illegalised journeys.

As stated at the beginning of this section, infrastructures have been crucial to foster *connectivity* and promote circulation of goods, people, and ideas, to the extent that it is possible to affirm that “Mobility depends on people, spaces, infrastructures, technologies, laws, and knowledge” (De Genova et al., 2022, p. 65). Korpela (2016, p. 113), echoing the position of De Genova et al. (2022), argues that the “ability and tendency to move depends, among other things, on infrastructural circumstances”. The author questions the possibility of moving outside infrastructures, claiming that “although infrastructures often restrict individual agency in terms of transnational mobility, transnational agency without infrastructures is difficult, or even impossible” (ibid., p. 125). Thus, within a global mobility regime, which manage mobility through visas, passports and borders (see Salter, 2006), migrants shape “alternative (often illegal) infrastructure instead of moving outside of any infrastructures” (Korpela, 2016, p. 125).

The landscape in which migrants’ illegalised mobilities are negotiated and enacted, has been conceptualised and critically investigate through terms such as *route* (Hess, 2012; Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; Queirolo Palmas, Rahola, 2020) and *via* (Walters et al., 2022). Ample space will be given later in the dissertation to *route* and its construction in the Balkan region. At this point, it is important to note that in the early 2000s, the concept of the ‘migratory route’ became central to the European Commission’s approach to migration (Hess, 2012). Migratory route management shifted from focusing solely on the front-line to encompassing various points along migrants’ journeys (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015). To a conceptualisation that views the spatial production of the route from above, as an “object of policy” (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias, 2019) to be governed, is opposed the bottom-up production of mobility tactics that shape migratory journeys. Indeed, Queirolo Palmas and Rahola (2020, p. 66) frame the route as a bottom-up “constructed and inhabited

space”, characterised by stations, communities, and localities established by migrants on the move in alliance with acts of solidarity – both collective and individual – emerging from local communities, activists, and volunteers (see also Giliberti, 2024).

Thus, while the route requires a broader analysis of the institutional constructions, failings, frictions, and re-appropriations within these spaces, the concepts of *via* remain anchored in the material role of infrastructures as the vital *arteries* of circulation and human mobility. Indeed, for Walters et al. (2022, p. 7) the term *via* – Latin for way or road – “highlights routes and the infrastructures that underpin them”, but it also means a stopover during a journey: travelling from city A to C *via* city B. Railroads, roads, ports, stations, mountain passages, airports, but also cities and neighbourhoods are part of migrants’ trajectories, going to constitute ever-changing geographies of tactics employed by undocumented migrants. This vast body of literature analysing the spaces of irregularised mobilities are closely linked with those investigating the dispositives of bordering, containment and deceleration in both rural and urban areas (Contenta, 2020; Petričević, 2023).

As noted by Mitchell (2020) infrastructures actively “work on time”, given that “Time and space are linked, so the conquest or compression of the first is naturally associated with the second”. Migration studies have highlighted the capacity of institutional infrastructures of detention and control to produce fragmented and convoluted journeys (Collyer, De Haas, 2012; Tazzioli, 2020), resulting in forms of temporal injustice and stolen time (Fontanari, 2017; Khosravi, 2018). Along the Balkan route, this has occurred due to the re-scaling of digital and legal infrastructures to member and candidate states with the reception, screening and identification procedures harmonised to the one of the EU.

In response to the violence of this externalised and internalised securitarian apparatuses, the bottom-up ‘work on time’ materialises through the creation of ‘stations’ – solidarity spaces that punctuate

migratory routes; as scholars have noted: “something resembling an underground railroad had also emerged through the multiple but dispersed infrastructures of solidarity” (Fontanari et al., 2022, p. 107; see also Queirolo Palmas, Rahola, 2020). These route ‘stations’, with their regimes of in/visibility, constitute privileged spaces for the study and circulation of geopolitical knowledge concerning irregularised migration. They are sites from which to investigate the “social organisation of mobility”, rather than focusing on its non-linearity (Lindquist, 2009, pp. 9–10), while also avoiding the imposition of a “panoptic spotlight” on migrants’ tactics (Queirolo Palmas, Rahola, 2020, p. 11).

Additionally, an important aspect that will be discussed within the two sites of this research is the geographical and historical characteristic of the solidarity infrastructure, which connects diverse struggles through time and space:

“These mobile and temporary infrastructures of migrant solidarity across borders do not only travel through spaces but also over time. By that, I refer to the political memory of struggles that has been sedimented over the last few decades in the Alpine valleys and that recently has been reactive in support of the migrants” (Tazzioli, 2020, pp. 147-148).

In Chapter Four and Five, by situating the research within two local NGOs that have been active for several years, the sedimented history of solidarity embedded in these two European peripheral capitals will emerge, along with the practices that have developed from it.

In conclusion, I want to highlight the importance of the ethnographic method in studying infrastructure. Knox and Gambino point out that anthropological studies of infrastructure have had the value of showing “how their systemic qualities are created through tangible activities that take place in offices, in laboratories, in communities and neighbourhoods, in debating chambers, on websites, social media platforms, and in images and documents which circulate through social networks online and offline”. For Wakefield (2018, p. 8): “That so many are now studying

infrastructures, whatever their orientation, alone may be indicative of a society that is ready to reinvent the world”. Through the ethnographic materials, this research will explore how solidarity encounters – sometimes “sustained” in space and time, and other times “fleeting” (Wilson, 2017) – inform the infrastructures supporting migrants in their border-crossing tactics as well as in their waiting, giving rise to new forms of welcoming and hosting.

4. Scales Borders infrastructures

The institutional construction of the route

This dissertation draws on the intersections and connections between the concepts of scales, borders, and infrastructures to analyse the socio-spatial dynamics unfolding within the space of the migration route, as well as the forms of discreet, everyday resistance activated by those who inhabit these territories. The analysis of the Western Balkan route incorporates the perspective that routes are not only “objects of policy” (Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias, 2022), but also lived spaces (Giliberti, 2024) where diverse agencies meet and come into conflict. In this regard, Stojić Mitrović (2022) refers to the notion of the ‘Balkan circuit’² to account not only for the non-linearity of movements, but also for the constant interplay of actors present in these territories, including police officers, NGO staff members, activists, and researchers.

This multi-scalar dynamic is also reflected methodologically, drawing on two approaches from the ethnographic tradition in the study of migration: ethnographic regime analysis (Tsianos et al., 2009; Tsianos, Karakayali, 2010; Hess, 2012) and the “in place” approach (Lindquist, 2009). Methodologically, multiscalarity is adopted as a gaze through which to interpret the dynamics taking shape within the space of the route. This shifts the focus from the narratives and policy implementations of the various institutions engaged in the “external dimension of internal security”

² M. Stojić Mitrović “Balkan Circuit”. 01/07/2022. e-ERIM
<https://e-erim.ief.hr/pojam/p-balkanski-kruzni-tok-p?locale=en>.

(Bigo, 2014), to the personal accounts of involvement in everyday debordering practices carried out by different actors across two cities traversed by the route.

As noted earlier, this research draws on Cobarrubias's (2020) analysis of border externalisation in North African countries. The author identifies this process as scalar, emphasising the ways in which the EU re-scales its migration governance practices into other territories. I argue that this perspective can be transposed to the Western Balkan route – a polymorphic space that, over the past decade, has undergone profound transformations, in which the advancement of EU accession process and integration into the EU border regime have played a significant role, reflected in Croatia's entry into the Schengen Area in January 2023.

Cobarrubias (2020, p. 2), bridging Moore's (2008) invitation to examine the scalar dimension of practices with scholarship in critical migration and border studies, advocates for a "spatial reading of border externalization". In the case of this research, the spatiality of border externalisation in the Balkans is traced back to the dissolution of the SFRY during the 1990s. After the wars, the post-Yugoslav space first experienced a process of border multiplication (Milivojevic, 2019; see also Stefanov, Radović, 2021; Jansen, 2023), followed by a phase of regionalisation (Tzifakis, 2007; Lika, 2023), and, from 2015 onwards, re-bordering processes shaped by the priorities of EU accession negotiations (Bužinkić, Hameršak, 2017; Hameršak et al., 2020; Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020; Beznec et al., 2020).

Over the course of three decades, the region has shifted from being the place of origin of "the first large refugee movement since World War II within Europe" (Hess, Kasperek, 2022, p. 139) to serving as "a kind of 'dumping ground' or 'buffer zone' for unwanted people on the move" (Christoph, Jeremić, 2020, p. 9). This conceptualisation foregrounds the overlap produced by EU institutions and agencies in constructing the shifting geopolitical category of the "Western Balkans" firstly as a region

and, later on, as a migration route.³ It entails the making of a regional interlocutor and a space of migration governance which, as will be shown, increasingly overlap and are contested from below. In this context, a multidimensional reading of these three relational concepts highlights the complexity of the object of study and the tensions that emerge when the top-down and bottom-up dimensions are brought together.

By incorporating into the analysis of the spatial production of the route the literature from critical border studies and on infrastructures, EU integration can be read as a *scalar project* – one that operates through the rescaling of borders via the harmonisation of diverse infrastructures (legal, logistical, digital) to EU standards. This process entails a shift in control away from the geographical border lines, relying on border dispersal and multiplications through “borderwork” (Rumford, 2006, 2009; BurrIDGE et al., 2017), and othering and ordering practices (Van Houtum, Van Naerssen, 2002). Crucial to this is the EU approach to ‘policy transfer’ (Stubbs, 2005) of migration management policy in the Western Balkan region and the upgrading of surveillance technologies (Milivojevic, 2019; BVMN, 2023). In this regard, infrastructures such as Eurodac and the Schengen Information System (SIS) are conceptualised as a multiscalar configuration of the digital border, working on the spatial-

³ The term “Western Balkan route” is used within the geographical subdivision of the different branches of the broader “Balkan route”. The Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) distinguishes between the “Eastern Balkan route”, referring to the segment travelled by people moving from Türkiye to Greece, and the “Western Balkan route”, which crosses the countries of the former Yugoslavia, as well as Albania, and enters EU territory via Croatia, Hungary, or Romania. Further information is available on the BVMN website: <https://borderviolence.eu/introduction-to-context>. The perspective adopted in this dissertation aligns with that proposed by Zocchi (2023), which acknowledges the institutional nature of the term – coined by Frontex to map migrant movements across these territories – while also emphasising the irreducibility of mobility practices in this space to the data-driven analyses of European institutions, and the capacity of migrants to trace new trajectories across this context. In this dissertation, the term “Western Balkan route” brings together multiple analytical dimensions: the geographical scope of the research (a multi-sited ethnography conducted in two countries historically associated with the Western Balkan region); and an institutional, top-down construction of the route by European institutions, which is examined and critically juxtaposed with the lived experiences of those who inhabit these spaces and support mobility or (temporary) forms of dwelling. While the term “Balkan route” is used when engaging with the literature that adopts a historical perspective on the route as well as to convey a broader geographical dimension to the analysis.

temporal dimension (Mitchell, 2020) that structure the governance of migrants' mobility through mobility (Tazzioli, 2020).

Similarly, by centring the conceptual framework on borders, the contributions of the other two concepts to the analysis of the European Union's border externalisation process come into sharper focus. The border emerges as a social relation (Mezzadra, Neilson, 2013) and as a "plane of struggles" (Tsianos et al., 2009), reproduced within states, acquiring multiscalarity (Bialasiewicz, 2012) and incorporating a range of infrastructures. A shift in analytical focus towards the border uncovers the reproduction along the route of inhospitable infrastructures – namely, collective reception centres for the (temporary) accommodation of migrants present in these territories. What emerges is an "archipelago of camps" (Anderlini, Queirolo Palmas, 2023) along the route, representing the outcome of the "scalar project" (Moore, 2008) through which EU institutions foster policy harmonisation in the sector of reception. This proliferation of camps is sustained by a persistent crisis-driven narrative that continues to dominate asylum and migration discourses across EU member states (Tazzioli, De Genova, 2016).

For the collective centres that, among other facilities, make up this archipelago, the relational aspect highlighted by Star (1999) applies: paraphrasing the author, what for the EU and its implementing partners constitutes an infrastructure, for others represents an obstacle. From this perspective, the distinction between the "inside" and "outside" of the Schengen border becomes blurred; it ceases to serve as a definitive marker and instead assumes the character of a geopolitical label – one increasingly eroded by cooperation agreements and border externalisation processes. In terms of border and migration management, the Western Balkans region is, thus, already deeply embedded within the European Union's migration policy framework.

With regard to infrastructures, as Korpela (2016) notes, it is virtually impossible to move outside of them, and migrants often resort to using informal infrastructures built by themselves or, as will be discussed further below, in alliance with solidarity actors. As noted earlier, the defining feature of infrastructures lies in their capacity to work on space and time, contributing to the shaping of conditions of arrival and departure (Meeus et al., 2019). From a top-down perspective they emerge as an attunement to the multiscalar effort of harmonisation of migration policies brought forward by EU institutions. In addition to the “modes” identified by Larkin (2013), metaphorical mode for analysing and accounting for both strategies of control and governance, and tactics for reclaiming the capacity to migrate has emerged. This metaphorical mode is employed by Queirolo Palmas and Rahola (2020), who conceptualise the “station” as a site of solidarity, and by Lindquist (2009), who identifies the station as a vantage point for studying the social organisation of mobility. The following section discusses how these infrastructures emerged as mobilising reaction to the lived reality along migration routes.

The counter-production of spaces of encounters and solidarity

Solidarity, as conceptualised here, intersects with the concepts of scale, borders, and infrastructure, generating both a counter-narrative to institutional discourses and spaces of encounter, exchange, and social transformation. The hybrid and polymorphic nature of solidarity necessitates a review of selected literature that foregrounds its diverse nuances. Following Birey et al. (2019, p. 4), I start from the assumption that “solidarity means different things to different actors, takes on different shapes in different contexts, and is invoked to explain and define a wide range of practices, discourses, positionings and social relations”. In addition, these contextual differences and heterogeneity take shape in the present as an interweaving of current conditions with the “historical layers condensed in the places and the intersections with the memory of previous exoduses and displacements” (Altin, Degli Uberti, 2022, p. 453). In practice such dynamics also surface along the Western Balkan route and form part of the *plane of struggles* shaped by the tension between multifarious governance

practices of migration and border enforcement, and the agency of migrants in devising tactics to circumvent and escape infrastructures of detention and deportation. Within this context, civil society has played a pivotal role. Since the re-emergence of the route during the ‘long summer of migration’ in 2015 (Hess, Kasperek, 2022), a variety of initiatives have been mobilised to assist migrants at different stages of their fragmented journeys (Collyer, De Haas, 2012). Indeed, as Fontanari (2019, p. 129) points out, “analysis of migrant trajectories, hence, stresses not only mobility as a component of them but also periods of rest, reorientation, and (un)expected and (un)intended temporary or long-term settlements”. In Croatia and Bosnia, as well as in Central and Western European countries, a variety of organisations and collectives have not only filled the gap but also opened cracks in the institutional narratives and practices associated with the governance of migration (see Milan, 2019; Hameršak, 2021). In those summer months, “doing something” became an imperative for humanitarian workers and European activist networks: “Whether in continuity with more established anti-racism movements or as expressions of new European identities, these responses have not simply expanded the realm of humanitarianism, they have also actively promoted different forms of participation and self” (Brković et al., 2021, p. 4).

In Sarajevo and Zagreb, as observed in other locations on the route, collaboration between endogenous and exogenous initiatives generates hybrid networks connecting local actors with international activists and volunteers, alongside organisations operating according to distinct political, religious, and operational frameworks (see Giliberti, Potot, 2021). In this dissertation, eight of the twelve participants hold either Bosnian or Croatian nationality, and their engagement resonates with Krasteva et al. (2019, p. 277) conceptualisation of solidarity citizenship:

“solidarity citizenship as symbolic battles against the hegemonization of the discourse of B/Ordering and Othering (Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002) and the project to transform the public space through the alternative discourses of solidarity, human security, inclusion, and acts that are

foundational for constituting civic actors through their struggle for human dignity and politics of friendship”.

Perspectives emerging from the intersection of social movement studies and civil society scholarship engage with the claims advanced by Krasteva and colleagues, echoing some of the excerpts from interviews analysed in Chapters Four and Five. In this regard, Della Porta (2020, p. 938) highlights voluntary participation as “oriented to the realization of the common good, defying visions of human beings as mainly self-interested”. While Artero (2024, p. 2) also observes that “pro-migrant volunteering activities also aim for change, specifically a change in attitudes toward refugees through ‘micro-politics’. This does not mean that conventional politics and volunteering are incompatible; in fact, they can reinforce each other”.

Despite the process of NGO-isation of civil society (Krasteva et al., 2019) in two post-socialist contexts such as Croatia and Bosnia, the establishment of NGOs nevertheless remains a grassroots tactic to shield support practices from criminalisation, while simultaneously scaling them up. These solidarity spaces – these “stations” – that have emerged along migration routes become nodes of an infrastructure which, from below, enables the circulation of information, services, and essential goods, giving rise to practices of *de-bordering through encounters* in the everyday life of migrants’ journeys. Building on Rozakou’s (2016, p. 188) emphasis on the centrality of encounters, she argues that: “Human encounters become sites that challenge state-based definitions, boundaries and lines of power (between citizen and non-citizen, for example)”. Encounters, thus, intersect with the geopolitics of the route, where the geopolitical construction of Hotspots, Temporary Reception Centers, and closed camps by EU’s and national’s authorities is countered by “geosocial efforts to construct safe space through practices of solidarity” (Mitchell, Sparke, 2020, p. 1047), aimed at rescaling dignified forms of reception, integration, and safe passage. Within this framework of

“geosocial efforts” and encounters, the biographies of solidarity actors intersect with those of migrants (Lofranco, Tarabusi, 2025).

As previously discussed, within the processes of EU accession, the externalisation of EU borders, and the consequent harmonisation of policies and infrastructures, the polymorphic space of the route undergoes transformation. Encounters within solidarity spaces are therefore at times “sustained” and at others “fleeting” (Wilson, 2017). The meeting places in Sarajevo and Zagreb, opened by NGOs, assume different names depending on the functions they perform: safe houses, “free shops”⁴, community centres, social centres, and so forth. These sites embody “the insistence on people’s right to a social space of encounter, regardless of citizenship status challenges asylum seeker’s position as only having the right to basic services” (De Jong, Ataç, 2017, p. 34). Alongside the metaphor of “stations” (Queirolo Palmas, Rahola, 2020), which originates in abolitionist literature, Arampatzi’s (2017, p. 2156) notion of “urban solidarity spaces” proves particularly relevant for this study, situated as it is in two cities along the route. As the author explains: “The notion of ‘urban solidarity spaces’ involves the spatial practices of solidarity and struggle that unfold at the territorial, social and economy levels, and aims to further understandings of how people and communities contest crises” (ibid.). The crisis faced by the communities involved in this research is that linked to the governance of migration by the EU (Tazzioli, De Genova, 2016) and by the states along the Western Balkan route.

This community of solidarity actors, who participated in this research, configures itself as a “community of interest” (Fleischmann, 2020, p. 28), at times also sharing “commonalities of events” (Giliberti, Queirolo Palmas, 2024; see also Tazzioli, Walters, 2019; Giliberti, Potot, 2021). Building on Arendt’s (1966, p. 84, cited in Fleischmann, 2020) conceptualisation of solidarity as a “community

⁴ The space, referred to as free shop by the NGOs staff, is usually a room organised like a shop, with donations arranged on clothes hangers, allowing people to try on what they wish and take what they need.

of interest with the oppressed and exploited”, Fleischmann suggests that solidarity should be understood as producing “relationships between groups and individuals with unequal rights and resources”. In turn, Giliberti and Queirolo Palmas (2024) emphasise the role of shared past experiences within a community in fostering a particular sensitivity to specific conditions.

Within these solidarity spaces, and in the encounters between diverse subjectivities opposing the border regime, a process of route-making from below emerges. The route, as inhabited and polymorphic space, is shaped by the dynamics previously described – those linked to the interplay of scales, bordering, and infrastructural harmonisations – that unfold in response to the stubbornness of migrants (Mezzadra, 2020) within their everyday life along the route.

In this sense, the three concepts that constitute the theoretical framework of this research are also mobilised to examine solidarity through its discrete and micro-political practices (Artero, 2024). The city scale provides the vantage point from which to ethnographically analyse both the support practices that take shape along the route, within and beyond the Schengen Area, and the role of cities as “crossroads” (Queirolo Palmas, Rahola, 2020) of the Western Balkan route. Placing emphasis, from time to time, on the scalar practices and projects of solidarity actors will contribute to spatialising the models of reception and inclusion advanced by civil society, in opposition to institutional frameworks, with the longer-term aim of gaining recognition as dignified models of reception and support at both national and regional scales.

At the same time, the entanglement of scales and borders emerges from the connections established by actors operating at the urban scale between the phenomena of exclusion and segregation that they witness on a daily basis and the broader context shaped by EU practices of border and migration management. Within the process of ‘solidarity-making from below’ (Arampatzi, 2017), a new infrastructure takes shape – one that arises with the objective of coping with the shortcomings of

institutional services and policies, while simultaneously adopting creative new modes of welcoming and hosting.

In these solidarity spaces, where the global intersects with the local, solidarity takes shape through practices that, as I was able to document through participant observation, are grounded in encounters. Within these spaces, the multiscalar character of solidarity networks materialises: expressions of solidarity from distant places, through fundraising and donations of goods, meet the migrants' needs for the material reconstruction of their capacity to travel. At a symbolic level, these practices enter into an infrastructural lexicon – that of the stations of an underground railroad (see Lindquist, 2009; Whitehead, 2017; Queirolo Palmas, Rahola, 2020; Fontanari, 2022). This infrastructure of circulation – of goods, information, and knowledge along the route – both gathers networks and constitutes nodes. In this process, the agency of migrants in directing and shaping the work of solidarity actors cannot be underestimated.

Through the ethnographic method, the socio-technical characteristics that emerge (Knox, Gambino, 2023) are those of the sensible and the relational. The maintenance of the solidarity infrastructure takes place through networks and contacts that exceed the local scale, while at the same time the practices embedded within it are experienced as simultaneously local, regional, and continental. As will emerge in Chapters Four and Five, the features of this infrastructure are material, informational, and relational: a flexible infrastructure composed of everyday solidarity encounters, bonds of friendship, and the exchange of information and objects valuable to (re)claim, once again, the right to freedom of movement.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

Doing fieldwork in and outside Schengen

Introduction

This chapter discusses the methodological choices that have guided this research along the so-called Western Balkan route. The study is situated within a multi-sited ethnographic framework, in which the researcher's movement from Sarajevo to Zagreb entails the crossing of the Schengen border.

Direct involvement in local NGOs engaged in solidarity initiatives with migrants changed after this crossing. This shift also reshaped the context, the challenges encountered, and the tactics deployed by both solidarity actors and migrants. The first section situates this work within the ethnographic tradition concerned with mobility, the multiplication of borders, and solidarity practices in European borderlands. Having clarified the methodological framework, the discussion, then, turns to the research background, by recounting previous professional and activist experiences that laid the groundwork for this research project. The following section focuses on field access and the question of researcher positionality. At this stage, I recall key events that led my fieldwork to unfold within two local NGOs in two former Yugoslav capitals. Shifting between the role of volunteer and that of researcher in the field was not always straightforward, and required a series of negotiations that are addressed in this part of the text.

Given the context in which I was operating, and in light of the increasing criminalisation of solidarity that has, over the years, affected both individuals and organisations engaged in supporting migrants within and beyond the borders of the EU, ethical considerations and the safeguarding of participants' anonymity became matters of primary importance. These concerns are paired with a sensitivity towards an ethical approach that is both procedural and relational. While, section six outlines the techniques employed to collect data during the year of fieldwork.

The chapter concludes by positioning the research at the city scale, identifying Sarajevo and Zagreb as vantage points from which to investigate the macro- and micro-dynamics shaping the ongoing transformations of the Western Balkan route, highlighting their significance as interconnected yet contrasting sites for observing these dynamics.

1. Multi-sited ethnography along the Western Balkan route

This research is a multi-sited ethnography conducted in Sarajevo and Zagreb over a period of thirteen months. During these months I volunteered in two local NGOs: “Kompas 071” in Sarajevo, and “Solidarity Initiative”⁵ in Zagreb. This engagement varied in intensity across the two sites, with Sarajevo representing a more immersive involvement and Zagreb a comparatively limited participation, reflecting the differing ‘thickness’ of the two fieldworks. This difference emerged from factors related to both the context and the research design – such as the differing operations of the two NGOs and the duration of the fieldwork in relation to the doctoral funding. For this reason, the fieldwork conducted in Zagreb is configured as comparatively more “thinly” than the one in Sarajevo. This is reflected in a greater reliance on institutional documentation and interview extracts, and a reduced use of fieldnotes. The perspective adopted is that of those who work daily with populations who are (temporarily) resident in the city, while the work of actors primarily dedicated to denouncing the violence of the European border regime remains beyond the scope of this analysis. The research rests on the assumption of “rigorous partiality” (Clifford 1986, p. 25), recognising researcher’s positionality and roles in the field.

Moreover, by acknowledging that the researcher “comes into contact with real people who build real, living relationships”⁶, the fieldwork unfolds as a web of relationships (Fava, 2017, pp. 139–140). The “I”, who speak in these pages, is situated within a continuum of past experiences, encounters, and

⁵ In light of past episodes of criminalisation, and more generally the difficulties of working in the Croatian context, it was agreed with the staff members of the NGO where I volunteered during my time in the city to pseudonymise its name.

⁶ All translations from English into Italian of texts originally published in Italian have been carried out by the author.

journeys, now being translated into textual form.⁷ The author's 'monophonic exposition' will engage in dialogue with the 'polyphony' of my interlocutors' voices and their diverse worldviews (see Clifford, 1993, p. 65).

This research fits within the framework of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995), enriched through three complementary approaches: the first being the 'in place' approach (Lindquist, 2009; Salazar et al., 2017), the second, the 'ethnographic regime analysis' (Tsianos et al., 2009; Tsianos & Karakayali, 2010; Hess, 2012), and, the third, the 'ethnographic activism' (Giliberti, Queirolo Palmas, 2024). Each approach will be detailed in the following lines.

Three ethnographic approaches

Once in the field, I found myself part of a small group of individuals who, through an 'in place' position, become involved in the (im)mobility dynamics of others. In other words, nationals and internationals who, by creating solidarity spaces and support activities, within NGOs, engage with migrants' claim for freedom of movement. Lindquist's (2009) approach is reflected in my decision to position myself within solidarity spaces and to adopt the relatively "static" stance of the actors who created them, aiming to analyse the infrastructure of solidarity. Although Lindquist focused on the circular mobility of Batam inhabitants, his analogy applies here: observing mobility while remaining in place allows one to understand the social organisation of movement rather than only the routes themselves. To illustrate, imagine observing dynamics at a train station: one can see who boards, who disembarks, and who is visible or hidden, while also analysing broader systemic aspects such as ticketing, policing, and informal economies. Lindquist positions himself peripherally relative to global financial capitals to examine mobility across developed and developing regions.

⁷ In some cases, due to the collective nature of specific experiences and reflections, the text alternates between the first-person singular and plural.

The methodology adopted by Lindquist resonates with the ethnographic research method used in this study. By focusing on two ‘migratory crossroads’ (Queirolo Palmas, Rahola, 2020) along the Western Balkan route, in two European peripheral countries, the researcher analyses how solidarity intersects with the desire for mobility, filling the time of waiting during migrants’ convoluted journeys. Using Lindquist’s terminology, alongside that of Queirolo Palmas and Rahola, if Sarajevo and Zagreb are configured as migratory crossroads, the two organisations where I volunteered can be identified as ‘stations’ where alliances and friendships are forged, and access to essential services is ensured with dignity.

Moreover, from there, within the daily encounters with migrants, asylum seekers and NGOs staff members it was possible to grasp both the geopolitics of the route (the speed of the journey, the itineraries, the intensity of border violence, etc.) and the positioning of the two cities within the Western Balkan route, together with the current state of the reception infrastructure and the access to the asylum procedure at both the city and national scale. Thus, through the words of solidarity actors it is possible to ethnographically interrogate the European mobility regime: a system of norms and practices that defines who can move, by what means, in which directions, and at what speeds. In these contexts, the “stubbornness” of migrants (Mezzadra, 2020) intersects with mundane initiatives of solidarity enacted by ‘activist citizens’ (Krasteva et al., 2019) within a ‘battleground’ (Dimitriadis et al., 2021; Ambrosini, 2024), where they engage in the organisation of a broad range of solidarity initiatives.

The research aims to articulate the microsocial data, which emerges through participation and ethnographic observation, in relation to phenomena occurring on a macrosocial scale (Fava, 2017, pp. 63–64). In the early 2000s, a group of scholars positioned themselves along what was then known as the ‘eastern route’, which extended from Türkiye to the Central European countries. By combining

“ethnographic research with discourse analyses and an analytical focus on the macro level” (Hess, 2012, p. 428), they understood the expansion of the European border regime as a ‘plane of struggle’, in which migrants’ ability to contest and challenge the regime of mobility control plays a key role in shaping it (Tsianos et al., 2009; Tsianos & Karakayali, 2010). Through this method known as ‘ethnographic regime analysis’, these scholars have offered an empirical informed critique of the concept of “Fortress Europe”, conceptualising the border not so much as a wall, but rather as a “highly perforated system or regime” (Tsianos et al., 2009, p. 2). This filter, which operates on the temporal dimension of migrants’ journeys, is still active today.

During the periods in which I conducted my ethnographic research, it was evident, and emerged in several conversations, that «sooner or later, one gets through». In these discussions, it was clear that the ability to mobilise resources and connections were key to success. Combining Lindquist’s in-place approach with ethnographic regime analysis enables a nuanced examination of the EU border regime along the Western Balkans. This regime is shaped by the tension between the implementation of migration and border management policies and multi-scalar practices of resistance mobilised by supportive citizens and international actors in alliance with migrants.

While the ‘ethnographic activism’ (Giliberti, Queirolo Palmas, 2024) resonates as an important positionality in my research. This approach emphasises the material engagement of the researcher in solidarity practices, rather than detached observation. Solidarity manifests in various forms of support for freedom of movement, manifested across different contexts and along multiple routes. In their proposal, “ethnographic activism is distinguished from activism/militancy because the researcher does not position himself as a loyal organic intellectual of one side, but as a critical intellectual who, through their empirical work, seeks to reflect on the tensions and potentials that run through the side(s) they have chosen to act from” (Giliberti, Queirolo Palmas, 2024, p. 15). Data collection thus becomes a moment in which the researcher interacts with various actors working for or against the

reproduction of segregationist and securitarian policies, engaging with border police, solidarity groups, and actors operating in humanitarian fields. My volunteer role at “Kompas 071” and “Solidarity Initiative” positioned me to observe and participate in solidarity, intertwining ‘doing’ and ‘writing’ about solidarity.

The key role of solidarity actors along the route

Along the route, Sarajevo and Zagreb emerge as places where those who arrive have already been travelling for a long time, and where mobility takes the form of struggle: sometimes actively pursued, other times endured. In both capitals, migrants arrive, depart, and sometimes return, in a journey where the starting point disappears and arrival destination fades away (Pellegrino, 2024; Franchi, 2025). The route, seen from within, presents a layering of choices and constraints that cannot be reduced to a single, unifying trend. For migrants, the final destination is continuously redrawn step by step, encounter by encounter. Within the Schengen Area, migrants’ ability to cross borders is constrained by readmission procedures under the Dublin Regulation, which often entail a renewed arrival – or, in some cases, a return – and a waiting period aligned with the processing of asylum applications.

In the following chapters of the dissertation, through the juxtaposition of different analytical scales (Pál, 2013; Pellegrino, 2024), the route as a space of tensions become evident: from the materiality of EU funds and budgetary priorities for reception and border control to the everyday encounters among local actors, international NGO staff, migrants, and asylum seekers. From these interactions, spaces of solidarity emerge, and rights-based practices are enacted.

Within this polymorphic space (Jessop et al., 2008), the ability of those who have mobilised to fill the gaps left by institutions emerges, as they promote creative support mechanisms and new forms of coexistence, connecting local resistance to processes of exclusion and segregation to the broader

contestation of the EU border regime. In Sarajevo and Zagreb, as in other parts of Europe, the demand for freedom of movement carried by migrants through their tactics meets the instances of the solidarity actors, which, through a myriad of activities, and “going beyond the boundaries of legal entitlements, citizenship, and national belonging” (Ambrosini, 2024, p. 527), aim at building a more socially just society from below.

2. Research background

The research is situated within the context of my activism and my professional role as an asylum caseworker (*operatore legale*). Activism first took me along the Balkan route between April and May 2016, just a few months after the signing of the agreement between the European Council and Türkiye in March of that year. This agreement, coupled with a shift in asylum policies in Central European countries, brought an end to the ‘formalised corridor’ (Bez nec et al., 2016) and led to the criminalisation of migrant mobility. During those days in April, we arrived in Idomeni – the border between Greece and North Macedonia. We found ourselves walking and talking with migrants at the makeshift camp located at the town’s railway station, on the edge of Europe, where the tracks and trains were overtaken by a sea of tents. The crowd was so large that even the fields adjacent to the station had been used for camping, as people waited for the barbed wire, stretched along the Macedonian border, to be removed and the route reopened. Those who had the means managed, using various tactics, to bypass the militarised borders and reappear in a country in Central Europe. By the end of May, a few weeks after our return to Italy, the camp was cleared and the residents were transferred to newly established institutional camps in Greece (see Minca, Rijke, 2017).⁸

In 2019, while working as a legal caseworker, my visit focused on the situation in the city of Athens and on Lesbos. I travelled with a group of researchers, activists, and lawyers from *Associazione per*

⁸ More info available here: BBC News “Greece moves thousands of migrants from Idomeni camp”. 24/05/2016 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36358891>.

gli Studi Giuridici sull'Immigrazione (ASGI)⁹. During this study visit, we were able to investigate the situation of asylum seekers on the Greek island. We spent some afternoons near the Moria camp, speaking with migrants and NGOs staff willing to share their experiences. The stories we heard centered on the experience of waiting for asylum claims to be processed in an isolated corner (Moria) of a remote place (the island of Lesbos).

In 2021, I arrived in Bosnia for the first time. Compared to my previous trips to Greece, this was the first experience outside the Schengen Area, marking a significant shift in the geopolitical and administrative context of migration. As an intern with an Italian NGO operating in Bosnia, I spent three months in Tuzla, where the project focused on distributing meals and Non-Food Items (NFIs) to migrants in transit through the town. During this period, I became familiar both with the local actors who had mobilised to support migrants and with the sites where this support was organised. In Tuzla, between August and November, the bus station constituted the centre of these activities. Migrants would arrive in the late afternoon, when blankets were distributed in the station square for the night. The following morning, a hot meal and some snacks for the onward journey were provided before people boarded buses to Sarajevo, from where they continued towards the border.

The stories from those months were characterised by convoluted journeys, long waits in Bosnia, and numerous attempts to cross the border thwarted by violent pushbacks, primarily by Hungarian and Croatian border police. One day, I met an Algerian youngster who, over a cup of tea, told me about his thirteen attempts to cross the Hungarian border first, then the Croatian one. He eventually left, only to reappear a few weeks later in Austria.

⁹ ASGI is an Italian association founded in 1990 composed of lawyers, researchers, and jurists who deal with immigration, asylum, and citizenship, whose goals include analysis of Italian and European legislation, as well as advocacy to oppose laws that violate the Italian Constitution and people's rights.

I also made two brief visits to Sarajevo and one to Bihać. Particularly significant was my first stay in Sarajevo, where I met the staff of Kompas 071 for the first time. I arrived while they were unloading donation boxes from the association's van. The staff invited us into a room that served as a social space. It was still quite basic, adjoining another room where washing machines and dryers were constantly running. At the far end of the laundry room was (and still is) a bathroom with two showers. Amidst the constant hum of machines operating at full blast, we were seated and informed that the space had been opened in 2020, and that the team was working hard to provide the association with the infrastructure it needed to operate effectively. I left Sarajevo eager to learn more about how local civil society had organised to create spaces of solidarity and support migrants struggling for their freedom of movement. Through their accounts, it became clear that their services were also accessible to marginalised sectors of the local population, impoverished by the 1990s war and the subsequent processes of privatisation and dismantling of the socialist welfare state (Štiks, Horvat, 2015).

In this context, the tale of supporting migrants intertwined with the history of the city's siege and the war in Bosnia, creating a complex mix of past and present. After a couple of hours of conversation, many questions remained open. In fact, Kompas prompted more questions than answers, leading me to propose a PhD project inspired by my encounter with the two Bosnian activists who shared their experiences with me during those two hours. Having secured a PhD scholarship at the University of Urbino, in February 2023, I sent an email to Kompas explaining who I was and the research themes that motivated me to offer my help as a volunteer. The proposal was warmly received, and on 18 October 2023, I landed in Sarajevo. Two years after my first contact with the organisation, I took a taxi to Kompas and began my fieldwork.

3. Detour: bureaucracy of doing fieldwork outside Schengen Area

As Fava (2017, p. 63) aptly highlights: "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”.

A prerequisite for my stay in the research field was securing the necessary documentation to reside legally in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). The visa I applied for and ultimately received was for voluntary work, which constituted one of the two roles I undertook during my fieldwork. I find it important to discuss this aspect because researchers involved in highly participatory research inevitably faces the dilemma of whether or not to ‘legalise’ their presence in the field. This process necessarily involves the bureaucracy of the host country, meaning that the temporalities of the bureaucratic procedures intertwine with those of the research itself. As Hoag (2011, p. 86) claims, “key aspect of bureaucracies is their ability to make clients wait”, conceptualising bureaucracy as a “hope-generating machine”, rather than a simple outcome. In this encounter “Rather than producing a certain rationality and coherence, the bureaucratic machine generates enjoyments, pleasures, fears and expectations” (ibid.), shaping the researcher’s position in the field.

Document retrieval and initial procedures

As many as seventeen documents are required for the ‘voluntary work’ visa, and the procedure seemed to be constantly changing. 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 Services for Foreigners’ Affairs (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. It was a glass-enclosed room on the ground floor. Immediately to the right was an office where residences were registered, and beyond that, the space opened into a hallway leading to offices not accessible to the public. On the left were the reception area and another

desk where fingerprints were taken. I entered this office again in December 2023, and then January, February and April 2024.

From the time I first entered the hall, I was surprised at how calm this office was, compared to the chaotic nature of the immigration offices I have seen in Italy in my past work as *operatore legale*. Only a dozen seats hinted at the 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, had 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 encountered in the capital's office. Listening to conversations in English between the officers and the audience, I understood that several were there for marriage and family matters: marrying a spouse/husband from abroad or declaring a relative's move to Bosnia. The quietness of the office was the concrete representation of the peripherality of Sarajevo with respect to transnational flows of investments, student exchanges, high and low skilled workers, alongside the near absence of asylum seekers.

Navigating the bureaucracy with local facilitators

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 distinct from my previous role as an asylum caseworker – 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, too». The city was enveloped in a thick layer of smog, with pollution levels frequently among the worst in the

world. On several occasions, news outlets reported Sarajevo as the most polluted city in the world, or at least among the top three, alternating on the podium's top step with Delhi and Lahore.¹⁰ 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 had 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 did neither land nor depart. 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». The list of documents was long, and we tried to catch up with as many as possible in a single day: starting with blood tests and medical check-up (which includes HIV and hepatitis tests), then opening an insurance, and concluding with the translation of my Italian documents (criminal records and pending charges).

In late December 2023 I was ready to deliver the documentation. On the morning of the delivery I went accompanied to the SFA. I had to fill out some forms and got fingerprinted. I handed over the documentation and waited in the hall. As often happens with paperwork, some were missing or incorrect 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 in the 60-day time frame they would contact me to update on the status of the procedure. My stay in the country was justified by the 'voluntary work' visa application. Towards the end of February, I recorded this episode in my diary:

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 on Saturday, 24 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

¹⁰ These episodes usually occur during the winter months: A.Kurtic "Bosnia's Capital Declares Alert Over 'Hazardous' Air Pollution. 22/01/2025. BIRN. Sarajevo <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/01/22/bosnias-capital-declares-alert-over-hazardous-air-pollution/>.

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 following 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 curious to see how long the wait will be 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 proceed as it should.

(Excerpt from the field journal, 22/02/2024, Sarajevo)

However, this new wording added to the inscrutability of bureaucratic procedure. Two more months went by, and a week into the expiration of the permit, I showed up at the SFA, again. I am told that my visa will be delivered, but I had to wait a few more days. While I was waiting in the hall to figure

out when to return to get the visa sticker, I met familiar faces: managers of international NGOs who were there to declare the residences of their employees and volunteers.

I returned in mid-April to the office toward the end of the week and finally got my volunteer visa printout. The time frame of the administrative practice of visa application intersected with that of my research in Sarajevo. The time dilation, the uncertainty about the response and the novelty of the procedure, generated a sense of precariousness in the possibilities of actually conducting a research period of more than three continuous months in Bosnia. The contingent timing of fieldwork was intertwined with the drawn-out temporality of bureaucracy (Hoag, 2011), characterised by long waiting periods. “What if they don’t renew my permit? What if they ultimately reject my visa application?” – these were the doubts provoked by the temporary document renewal process. With just one month remaining, when I had resigned myself to renewing the temporary permit every two months, the arrival of the visa stabilised my position in the country.

This episode illustrates how bureaucratic procedures can influence the practical dimensions of ethnography. Waiting, delays, and uncertainty prompted questions and shaped my positionality in the field. Engaging with the SFA and navigating local procedures also provided insights into the state’s infrastructure, administrative priorities, and the peripheral position of Sarajevo in transnational mobility flows, which inform the broader analysis of solidarity spaces along the Western Balkan route.

4. Field access and researcher’s positionality

Overview of fieldwork phase and first encounter in Sarajevo

My fieldwork was divided into two phases: from 18th October 2023 to 30th May 2024 in Sarajevo, and from 22nd June 2024 to 14th November 2024 in Zagreb. The research period was characterised by my participation as a volunteer at two local NGOs and marked by the effort to balance the dual role of volunteer and researcher. On 18 October 2023, I landed at Sarajevo airport and took a taxi to

Kompas. At the association, I had a chat with the staff, we introduced ourselves, and I was briefed on the shifts and the general operations of the NGO.

While I was getting to know the staff, a Palestinian man, who used to live in Jordan, came out of the laundry/shower room. I hadn't noticed him when I arrived. I had heard the sound of the washing machines, which may have masked the noise of his presence. He tells us he needs something to sleep on, as he has lost his blanket. In fact, today, in the area of the men's camp known as the "green zone" (because it is painted green), there have been some relocations to free up certain containers. According to the Palestinian man, the numbers are decreasing, and those in charge of the camp, the IOM, which is slowly transferring management to the SFA, tend to group the migrants together. He also tells us he has heard that Europe plans to send the army to the borders. We ask him some questions to get more information and understand where he heard or read this news, but we are unable to get any further details. (Excerpt from field journal, 18/10/2023, Sarajevo)

At home, driven by curiosity, I tried to understand the phrase that fell into the void: «Europe plans to send the army to the borders», and I found that on that very day, Italy's Minister of the Interior, Matteo Piantedosi, had ordered the suspension of Schengen starting from October 21st for a period of ten days, extendable. The decision was justified by the escalation of the Israeli military operation in the Gaza Strip and the rising number of arrivals via the Western Balkan route.¹¹ Italy would inaugurate a period of Schengen suspension, which would also impact Slovenia and Croatia, where the governments took similar decisions. This episode illustrates how information circulated in the field in a non-linear fashion, with knowledge moving between migrants and volunteers. I want, here, to highlight this first exchange to contextualise the start of my fieldwork. In October 2023, the Israel's war on Gaza and the ensuing humanitarian catastrophe¹² were used as an alibi to increase border

¹¹ More info available here: "L'Italia vuole ristabilire i controlli alla frontiera con la Slovenia". 18/10/2023. Il Post <https://www.ilpost.it/2023/10/18/controlli-frontiera-slovenia-schengen/>.

¹² More info available here: "Understanding the long roots of violence in Occupied Palestinian Territories and Israel". 28/03/2024. Amnesty International

controls along the Western Balkan route. The first person to inform me of this was a Palestinian migrant who had been living in Sarajevo for several years.

Another significant factor characterising my fieldwork was Croatia's entry into the Schengen Area in January of 2023. This event accelerated the movement of migrants from Bosnia towards the EU's member states and led to a significant number of relocations, under the Dublin Regulation, from Central European countries to Croatia (Hameršak, Pozniak, e-ERIM, 2023; AYS, 2023)¹³. So, while Bosnia witnessed a reduction in waiting times, Croatia imposed on the 'Dubliners' (Kasperek, 2016) response times for asylum requests that often exceeded two years.

Precondition of the field access

Having set the stage with my arrival in the Bosnian capital, I would now like to take a step back and reflect on the two key prerequisites that facilitated my access and legitimacy in the field: *i*) knowledge of the context, and *ii*) prior professional experience as an asylum caseworker in Italy.

Knowledge of the context was crucial in cities shaped by complex historical and political trajectories. This aspect, in both countries, is inextricably linked to the way in which the country is becoming member (in the Bosnian case), or has joined (in the Croatian case) the European Union, as well as how it is responding to the challenges of managing migration within its borders. In Sarajevo, my long-term volunteer proposal was accepted partly because I already had previous experience in Bosnia and was familiar with the country's current political context and past history. For Zagreb,

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/education/2024/03/understanding-the-long-roots-of-violence-in-the-occupied-palestinian-territories-and-israel/>.

¹³ On the ERIM project website, you can find the full contribution M. Hameršak "Seven Days Paper". 15/12/2023. e-ERIM <https://e-erim.ief.hr/pojam/p-seven-days-paper-p.pdf?locale=en> and R. Pozniak "Paromlin". 18/12/2023. e-ERIM <https://e-erim.ief.hr/pojam/p-paromlin-p.pdf?locale=en>.

prior engagement in Sarajevo facilitated introductions, as local solidarity groups along the route maintain strong networks and exchange information.

Upon arrival in the Croatian capital – at an introductory meeting at the “Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research”, where I conducted my visiting period – I received preliminary readings, including two war ethnographies and an analysis of the Croatian corridor of the Balkan route in 2015 (Čale Feldman et al., 1993; Jambrešć Kirin, Povrzanović, 1996; Bužinkić, Hamersšak, 2017). Familiarity with the context was beneficial both in easing my access to the field, where it positioned me as an engaged actor, and as a crucial element in examining the dynamic under study. The latter aspect is fundamental, because the study of solidarity along migration routes cannot be disentangled from an understanding of the historical-political context in which migration – specifically in this case, configuring as transit and (temporary) settlement – takes place. Indeed, it is through these ‘activist citizens’ – who, through their creativity, have opened spaces of solidarity and provided essential services – that the context itself will change, along with the lives of those who, by forging relationships with migrants, create bonds, alliances, and memories along the current Western Balkan route.

The second prerequisite was my prior experience providing legal support to asylum seekers in Italy. This aspect played a bridging role between me and ‘them’. Indeed, like the staff of “Kompas” and “Solidarity Initiatives”, I too was part of a category of workers who, on the ground, in the everyday work with migrants, deal with access to public services and the rights connected to the asylum request. A job characterised by high levels of stress and precarious prospects. My previous work experience led me to be accepted as someone carrying practical knowledge, gained through the daily work with asylum seekers in Italy.

Negotiating dual roles: volunteer and researcher

My past experiences and knowledge have helped me gain access to the field and reverberate in the two roles that, through their alternation, have shaped my fieldwork: volunteer and researcher.

Jordan and Moser (2020, p. 569) outline the importance of the volunteer role in gaining legitimacy, establishing rapport, “and in undermining potential suspicion, fear, and conspicuousness as an outsider without any productive or culturally definable role”. Volunteering allowed me to integrate into daily routines of the two NGOs, observe operational dynamics, and negotiate my research presence effectively. Moreover, in both research fields, my volunteer role was formalised. In Sarajevo, the NGO staff guided me through the preparation and submission of the documentation for obtaining a volunteer visa, while in Croatia, I was asked to sign a volunteer contract to justify my presence in that space, along with my rights and duties. As for the roles, in addition to balancing the identities of researcher and volunteer, the two research fields also required adaptation to different working methods and distinct conceptions of being a ‘volunteer’. For instance, my time in Sarajevo was marked by a highly participatory role within an organisation with a small staff. The presence of an additional person proved particularly valuable during the months when the accesses of migrants was especially high. In Zagreb, on the other hand, the association had a large pool of volunteers, with volunteer hours allocated among all those actively involved at the time, ensuring that everyone could contribute.

If, in hindsight, my past experiences had a positive impact on my access to the field, it was with my current position as a researcher that I had to negotiate my presence within these solidarity spaces and, more broadly, in the community of NGOs workers. My research focus on solidarity networks in urban settings defined my reference group as white individuals, belonging to different religious faiths and informed by various political positions, whether local or, like me, from the Global North. I was not studying ‘them’ (the migrants), but rather ‘us’ (the usually white people who, by forming alliances, open spaces of support). This alignment facilitated processes of self-reflexivity among the research participants. This aspect emerged during my ethnographic visit in May 2025, when, in the course of

an informal conversation, Aiša¹⁴ mentioned that the interview she had with me provided her with an opportunity to reflect on her work from a new perspective.

However, some interlocutors experienced disorientation due to my dual role, questioning whether volunteering informed the research. For example, during my stay in Sarajevo, after helping unload a truck, a staff member expressed curiosity about my research method:

«You are doing a PhD and you've spent your afternoon helping us unloading a truck of boxes, is it something helpful for your research? »

(Field note, April 2024, Sarajevo).

I must say that I found myself in the position of asking similar questions, eventually concluding that yes, participating in the various tasks and activities offered by different NGOs was part of my methodology and was key in shaping my understanding of the conditions in which solidarity practices develop. This disorientation stems from the great interest that has been generated over the years around migrants' journeys, but which, on few occasions, has asked the people involved in creating solidarity initiatives to speak about their experiences.

The individuals whose perspectives inform this research are highly educated and, like me, possess the privilege of moving freely across borders with passports and ID cards. As I have already highlighted, I share many similarities with them, and with some – like Danijela¹⁵ – I have even found overlapping life experiences:

«In 2015-16 with a couple of my friends we did the route for the first time in our life from Greece to Slovenia. Going with the vans and going with the money that we have collected in order to try to see what is going on on the route at the time. Germany opened its doors and was a different period for the migration. The things were functioning much differently that now, eight years

¹⁴ Aiša is a research participant, and excerpts of her interview are included and discussed in Chapter Four.

¹⁵ Danijela is a research participant, and excerpts of her interview are included and discussed in Chapter Four.

after, or more. And at the time I visited a lot of places along the route, starting from Idomeni in Greece, going all the way to Preševo, North Macedonia, passing through Serbia, through Belgrade, one of the key centers at the time, first to the Hungarian border, when it was still open, then after that to Croatia, because Hungary closed down and then Croatia opened, and then Slovenia».

(Danijela)

My prior experience in the field worked in my favour, but I made sure that this experience did not dominate my role as a volunteer in the new context. To adapt to the new working methodologies, I allowed the staff of the two NGOs to guide me, willingly accepting the position of ‘newcomer’. I considered crucial to adopt a perspective focused on learning first and foremost about the work, bringing up my past experiences only in specific moments of dialogue or when discussing the situation in Italy.

Furthermore, this shift in focus – from migrants to solidarity actors – has partially mitigated existing power asymmetries. In fact, the position of the volunteer within NGOs is a complex one. These spaces often contain highly sought-after items, accompanied by specific rules governing their distribution. In such moments, power asymmetry becomes tangible and is experienced by each person in a very personal way. I share the concerns expressed by Aiša in this excerpt, where a certain discomfort in managing the dynamics during distribution is highlighted:

«I’m trying not to be there, while they’re there, because I don’t want to look like a policeman who is looking how much things you are taking»

(Interview with Aiša, 17/05/2024, Sarajevo).

The decision to study the different forms of solidarity stems from a methodological commitment to avoid reproducing existing power asymmetries through my research. This was particularly relevant given my role as a volunteer – a position that, in practice, involved flexibly and case-by-case ‘monitoring’ compliance with a few basic rules. My interlocutors shared personal narratives of

engagement, offering both their perspectives and critical reflections on the contexts in which they operated. By focusing on less mobile subjects – compared to migrants – with whom I spent extended periods of time, I was able to maintain a continuous exchange and develop stronger, trust-based relationships. This emphasis on participation also shaped my interview process: in both research sites, I conducted interviews during the final stage of fieldwork, selecting interlocutors with whom I had already established rapport and mutual familiarity. Out of twelve interviews, only three were carried out with individuals I had not previously interacted with.

Features emerged while in the field

After discussing the factors that facilitated my entry into the research field and enabled me to conduct this multi-situated ethnography, I will now address the final two aspects that emerged once in the field. These features illustrate both the complexity of navigating these spaces and the opportunities for learning and understanding that arose through immersion in the field. They concern *i*) the mix of languages and *ii*) the presence of women working in NGOs.

The theme of language has been a constant throughout this fieldwork. Jordan and Moser (2020) highlight the emergence of a ‘camp language’ that facilitates exchanges between actors with different linguistic backgrounds within the camps along the Balkan route. I observed a similar dynamic in the spaces where I volunteered. In these contexts, the local staff language – Bosnian or Croatian – was combined with English, used as *lingua franca*, and varying levels of proficiency in other languages, such as Arabic, Turkish, French, Spanish, and Italian. During my two fieldworks I focused on studying the local language. This interest in the Bosnian and Croatian languages was met positively and helped build connections with the locals.

As for the second aspect, the majority of the people I interviewed – and those with whom I spent time in solidarity spaces – were women. This predominance is not surprising in the social and care sectors, where women traditionally represent the majority of the workforce. This trend also seems to emerge

in other borderlands where those accessing services are usually young and male, while, among those providing the services, women play a crucial role (Amigoni et al., 2025, p. 36), performing tasks that share with social work a blend of visible and invisible duties (Kosny, MacEachen, 2010, p. 365). On the one hand, the primary, visible activity is teaching Croatian or Bosnian language or sorting men's and women's shoes; on the other, there is a great deal of invisible care work involved, arising from bond-building with the individuals accessing the services, which leads to requests for personal matters, support in navigating bureaucracy, or a very much needed listening ear. The centrality of women's roles is evident in Sarajevo, where undocumented mobility is a defining characteristic of the city. In the Bosnian capital, it is women who forge alliances and create spaces and services, akin to the so-called 'low-threshold services' for migrants in transit, who are typically young men. This effort has led to various forms of support: from the recovery of equipment destroyed and/or confiscated by border police, which serves as the main form of material assistance, to the creation of community spaces, but also providing accommodation for those claiming asylum, language course, social activities, and more. Likewise, in Zagreb – where asylum seekers wait for the resolution of their cases and Ukrainian women live under temporary protection, awaiting the end of the war in their country – the predominance of women in NGOs leads to the creation of spaces dedicated to teaching language, job search, supporting children's homework, and a multitude of other activities.

In conclusion, in both research settings, my time was defined by a constant balance between the dual roles of volunteer and researcher, as well as by the multiple factors that shaped my daily work. Despite the alternation of identities and positions, I came to see myself as part of a collective effort, or, as Grewal (2024, p. 45) aptly puts it: “as part of a community engaged in struggle, each of us bringing whatever resources we have and playing whatever part we can”.

5. Ethical considerations

Still looming in the background is the issue of the criminalisation of solidarity, which increasingly in Europe takes the form of so-called “crimes of solidarity” (Fekete, 2009), with criminal charges and sanctions against collectives and individuals mobilising in support of migrants (see also Mezzadra, 2020; Marturano, 2021). Despite the NGOs I was in contact with during my fieldwork having the recognition to operate from the state, this does not necessarily shield them or their staff from future acts of criminalisation. For this reason, the procedural ethics underpinning the collection of interviews were complemented by a form of relational ethics (Clark-Kazak, 2021), which, as proposed by Fava (2017, p. 145), emerge through the very practices chosen to conduct the research. My dual role and the focus of the research, as discussed above, also imply a tension between academic objectives and the ethical commitment to ensure that the knowledge generated contributes to strengthening the role of these actors within their respective contexts (Jacobsen, Landau, 2003).

The ethical concern of avoiding harm guided my presence in the field and, along with confidentiality and informed consent, characterised not only my participation, but also the phase of interview collection. The sample of interviewees consisted of senior figures within international and local NGOs as well as long-term volunteer, who provide services outside institutional reception facilities to migrants in transit and asylum seekers. Despite this transparency, I am aware that this freedom of action has been an achievement over time and that, like any achievement, it is fragile and must be preserved. These individuals, whether foreign-born or locals, have personally invested in this work; some have relocated from different parts of the world to engage in it, while others have faced marginalisation or even criminalisation within their own communities. To care for the voices means, above all, respecting the work, professionalism and individual drives to undertake life choices that involve being away from home and, in some cases, even personal renunciations of work careers and marginalisation. In addition, especially with regard to locals, the narratives of their engagement in migrant support are intertwined with memories of the 1990s war and with personal and collective

histories of displacement and migration (both internal and towards Western Europe), all of which require to be treated with dignity and respect.

To ensure respect for confidentiality, anonymity and proper storage of interviews audio recordings and transcripts, an informed consent and information on the processing of personal data was drawn up following the guidelines of the Data Protection Officer of the University of Urbino. In line with this, the names appearing in the dissertation are pseudonyms and are not linked to the NGOs with which the participants are affiliated.

A dilemma between ethics and positionality emerged, particularly in Sarajevo, regarding the extent of my involvement: how many hours should I volunteer, ranging from being a total observer to a fully engaged participant? Should volunteering time be considered a form of “giving back”? With these questions in mind, I fit into the rotation, spending for long periods even four days a week in the association. I let – perhaps somewhat risky – my degree of participation be determined by the influx of people during opening hours. In busy weeks total participation prevailed, deeming it proper to behave as a full-time volunteer. While during times of numerically low access (such as during Ramadan or spring), my involvement decreased, leaving room for other activities. From my first contacts with both NGOs, I requested a certain degree of flexibility to take breaks from the field and return periodically to Italy.

Beyond procedural and relational ethics, the question of knowledge co-production remained central throughout my fieldwork, in a context where personal experience was inseparable from collective histories and practices. This raised further questions: Who is, in reality, the author of the field notes? And for whom is this knowledge being produced? To address the first question, I use direct speech in the dissertation to convey the polyvocality that characterised the fieldwork and to reflect the plurality of voices that informed my analysis. At the same time, I sought to bridge academic writing

and public engagement, combining scholarly outputs with collaborative forms of dissemination. For this reason, I welcomed the idea of being available in the future to participate in report writing together with the Kompas' board, allowing us to jointly contribute to the production of knowledge aimed at civil society – both locally and within Western European contexts.

6. Data collection

Participant observation

Participation, listening, and observation were the cornerstones of both the definition of the research project and its development. I set off for the field with a project rooted in my earlier experience (2021) in Tuzla (Bosnia and Herzegovina). At that time, migrants' waiting in Bosnia was prolonged, and attempts to cross the border into Croatia were numerous. Despite being in a medium-sized town, I had managed to establish good relationships with some migrants and asylum seekers who, following numerous pushbacks, had repositioned themselves in Tuzla. As reported by networks of activists, NGOs, and media outlets, between 2020 and 2021, the security apparatus along the Bosnia-Croatia border reflected a complete lack of guarantees for the human rights of those passing through. During the same years, incidents of chain pushbacks, involving the authorities of Italy, Slovenia, and Croatia, were intensifying. The violence of these chain pushbacks, which forced migrants back into Bosnia, alerted civil society in the countries involved, resulting in rulings of illegality from the Courts¹⁶. In this highly dynamic context, participation, listening, and observation were the essential for guiding the research. From the very first days, it became clear that we were witnessing a moment of acceleration of mobility along the route:

Two Iranian families arrived at the same time (...) They were moving quickly along the route. The lady who spoke English told us that it had taken her a month to reach Sarajevo and that the greatest difficulties were encountered

¹⁶ See the ruling from the Court of Rome deemed the chain-pushbacks as illegal: BVMN "Italian Court Ruling on Chain Pushback". 22/01/2021.

<https://borderviolence.eu/reports/italian-court-ruling-on-chain-pushback/>.

at the border between Türkiye and Greece (Excerpt from the field journal, 20/10/2023, Sarajevo).

This acceleration, as I learnt about during the first days of fieldwork, was linked to the Croatia's entry into the Schengen Area and the simultaneous issuance of the document colloquially known as the "seven days paper"¹⁷. These developments prompted me to reconsider the research focus and adapt it to the situation on the ground. Since establishing strong ties with migrants in the city seemed difficult, I decided to reorient my attention towards the practices and networks of solidarity, which has recently gained prominence in scientific literature (Krasteva et al., 2019; Giliberti, 2020; Della Porta, Steinhilper, 2021; Giliberti, Potot, 2021; Ambrosini, 2024; Artero, 2024; Amigoni et al., 2025). Through ongoing participation, I identified key dynamics to be explored in the interviews, while the daily experiences I recorded in my field diary allowed me to process and interpret what unfolded within these migratory crossroads and urban solidarity spaces.

Semi-structured interviews

A central component of the data collection process was the use of semi-structured interviews, conducted in both research fields during the final weeks of each stay. In most cases, interviews were held with individuals with whom I had established solid relationships over months of volunteering. Out of the twelve interviews, only three were conducted with people I had never met before, whose names had emerged from prior conversations. With the others, interviews often felt like a continuation or formalisation of ongoing exchanges, as signalled by remarks such as «you know what I mean» or «as you know».

¹⁷ The relationship between the "seven days paper" and the acceleration of mobility along the route will be discussed extensively in Chapter Five. More info on the "seven days paper" available here: M. Hameršak "Seven Days Paper". 15/12/2023. e-ERIM <https://e-erim.ief.hr/pojam/p-seven-days-paper-p.pdf?locale=en>.

Aiša began her interview by saying: «it's just funny because we know each other for eight months and now we are talking about this (laughing)». This personal connection, or at least the assurance of shared acquaintances, made the interviews unfold in a relaxed atmosphere.

Nevertheless, my dual role as volunteer and researcher inevitably influenced the dynamics of the interviews. The position I occupied within the NGOs might have softened or mediated certain responses, particularly in contexts where individuals represented organisations that collaborated closely. The transition from volunteer to researcher was formalised through the informed consent process and the explanation of research aims and data use. I believe this transitional process helped alleviate any reluctance and created an appropriate atmosphere for the interviews.

The semi-structured format enabled participants to share their experiences of work and volunteering in the context of migration in Sarajevo and Zagreb, addressing both local and national dynamics, as well as the internal functioning of their organisations. The same set of key questions guided all interviews, leaving room for elaboration through individual narratives. With prior consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. Their duration ranged from just over an hour to three hours. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant according to nationality and gender.

Field notes and ethnographic journal

As Emerson et al. (1995, p. 19) note, “doing” and “writing” are “interdependent and mutually constitutive activities”, and thus writing about the daily occurrences in the research field is itself part of doing ethnography. Similarly, Clifford (1993, p. 56) reminds us that “Although it is true that much ethnographic writing is generated in the field, the actual composition of the text is refined elsewhere”.

I wrote my field notes at home each evening, dedicating time for reflecting on the day, the meetings, and significant exchanges. As in other highly participatory studies (Morrow, Kettle, 2023), I chose to write as few notes as possible while participating in the activities of the NGOs. This entailed sacrificing certain elements from a research perspective, while nevertheless maintaining a focused

attention on my role as a volunteer. I chose to write my field notes at home, finding the right moment when I could pour the entire day onto paper and then later rework it into a field journal. As Navarini (2023, p. 425) suggests, the use of the term “notes” in ethnography signals to the reader that the text belongs to a category of writings that avoid the “claim to treat a given subject in a complete, organic, or exhaustive way, instead focusing on certain aspects, elements, or ideas that for some reason – usually explained in the text – are or may be considered worthy of note”.

As already evident in the previous paragraphs, the excerpts included throughout the dissertation serve to contextualise analytical discussions and to convey my own impressions of the processes observed. During fieldwork, keeping a journal was crucial both for recording daily events and meaningful exchanges, and for monitoring the saturation of observed dynamics. The following excerpt illustrates the journal’s role in tracking the “fatigue” of fieldwork:

I struggle to find time to update the journal. The words decrease in parallel with the accesses [of migrants] and the time spent there [at the association]. The dynamics are repeating themselves. (...) I am immersed in dynamics that are unfolding with a certain placidity, without anything truly standing out anymore. (Excerpt from the field journal, May 2024, Sarajevo).

July is unfolding very quietly, with few accesses, which gives me time to learn the new tasks. However, this calm is affecting the journal. (...) The journal is bearing the weight of the fatigue from my time in the field. (Excerpt from the field journal, July and October 2024, Zagreb).

These excerpts reflect the situation during my last month of fieldwork in Sarajevo and some of the first and last moments in Zagreb. During May 2024, I conducted the interviews and witnessed a significant decrease in migrants accessing the NGO’s services. This meant I spent much more time outside the association, prioritising other aspects of the research. As for Zagreb, I noted two instances in July and October when the journal updates became less frequent. Upon rereading these excerpts

and reflecting on the period during which I wrote them, I find myself contemplating the relational aspect of the journal. It is as though the dynamics I was observing, and which captured my attention, unfolded at the moment of interaction between differing subjectivities. Through their encounters, these subjectivities created a rich and fertile moment, brimming with insights. The quieter days, although necessary for rest and stress relief, offered few stimuli from a research perspective. In these moments, scattered through the year, the time spent at the associations was used to get to know one another and share stories – moments of bond-building that went beyond the research objectives. This process of relationship-building also strengthened the teamwork underpinning the NGO's daily activities. In the case of Zagreb, the initial period characterised by fewer accesses also provided me with the opportunity to acquaint myself with the new environment and the staff. The fieldwork in the Croatian capital began in the summer, and during the scorching days of July, I had the chance to try out some of the volunteers' tasks, thereby becoming more skilled with the new working methodology.

Doing research with a microphone

Alongside written and observational methods, I incorporated an additional tool into the research process: the audio recorder. Through field recording, I collected what Gallagher (2015) calls “malleable traces” – an archive of sonic fragments that can be “reanimated” during the composition of a soundscape. These recordings functioned, also, as *sonic notes* from the research field, complementing written reflections and contributing to a creative, multi-sensory approach to ethnography (Sacco, 2025).

Field recordings proved valuable for evoking the sensory dimension of the field, helping to reconstitute moments and moods when writing the journal. Ethical considerations were central: decisions were made regarding which sounds and voices to include or exclude, and all participants whose voices were recorded provided verbal and later written informed consent. Moreover, participants at the Sarajevo-based NGO were actively involved in the analysis of selected audio

materials, offering insights that were subsequently integrated into the related publication. Through this practice, the “ethnographic ear” (Clifford, 1986, p. 12; Western, 2020) guided both data collection and analysis, complementing participation and observation. Given the methodological depth required to integrate a sound-based analysis into research on migration and solidarity, I chose to explore this topic further in a dedicated article (see Sacco, 2025). In future publications, I plan to expand this perspective, drawing on the audio materials recorded in both Sarajevo and Zagreb.

7. Two cities

The research’s vantage point consists of two capitals, peripheral to the global cities. Both Croatia and Bosnia share a part of their 20th-century history – they were both part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, experienced its violent collapse, and underwent a long period of transition before becoming candidate and, eventually, member of the European Union.

As noted by Massey (2004), space is the product of multifarious practices, movements and connections. If space is the result of interactions occurring at different scales – from the local to the global one – then, “spatial identities such as places, regions, nations, and the local and the global, must be forged in this relational way too, as internally complex, essentially unboundable in any absolute sense, and inevitably historically changing” (Massey, 2004, p. 5). The ‘unboundable’ nature of spatial identities applies to cities as well. Artero (2019, p. 145) observes that the city emerges “as a node of multiple belongings and relations, constantly developing through connections that both stretch beyond the city and collapse into the urban sphere”. These two capitals represent privileged sites to investigate expressions of solidarity, both in relation to mobility and during moments of waiting. Drawing on Lindquist (2009), I contend that my ‘in place’ positioning on both sides of the border between the Schengen Area and the Western Balkans allowed me to examine how alliances and acts of solidarity are formed within broader infrastructural networks, while manifesting locally in these urban spaces.

Starting with the ‘long summer of migrations’ in 2015 (Kasperek, Speer, 2015), the Balkan route emerged from its “shadow and invisibility” (Hess, Kasperek, 2022). The first phase of the route, up until the early months of 2016, is referred to as the ‘formalized corridor’ (Beznec et al., 2016) and was characterised by the active role of the Balkan states in facilitating the journey of migrants towards the countries of Central and Northern Europe. During those months, core EU member states showed relative openness towards migrants, while the Croatian, Macedonian, and Slovenian authorities managed the section of the corridor passing through their countries. Migrants were compelled to follow the corridor and adhere to the travel schedules set by the authorities (see Hameršak et al., 2020). The passage of the corridor through Zagreb is well-documented in the literature, which highlights the various phases in which the Croatian institutional response was articulated, organising the transit to the northern and western border of several hundred thousand migrants (Šabić, Borić, 2016); the establishment of *Welcome! Initiative / Inicijativa Dobrodošli!*, its advocacy and key on-the-ground work (Bužinkić, 2017); the active role of civil society in organising moments of reflection and criticism of the securitarian policies that continue to shape the management of migration (Banich, 2020); and, more recently, the precarious condition of migrants and asylum seekers, marked by prolonged waiting periods in the city (Petričević, 2023). As pointed out by Šabić and Borić (2016, p. 4), after March 2016, and the closure of the ‘formalised corridor’: “For perhaps the first time since the 1990s, news emanated daily from this region, as personal narratives, institutional reactions, and media accounts filled the public space”. In Zagreb, the Croatian Ministry of the Interior, in close cooperation with the Red Cross, manages a reception centre for those seeking international protection, the Hotel Porin¹⁸, which currently has a capacity of 600 people (CLC, 2023). Through the years, migrants’ mobility within the Croatian capital has oscillated between visibility and invisibility¹⁹,

¹⁸ More info available here: Grubiša, I. “Porin”. 05/02/2023. e-ERIM

<https://e-erim.ief.hr/pojam/p-porin-prihvatali-scaron-te-za-traziteljce-azila-u-zagrebu-p?locale=en#:~:text=Officially%2C%20The%20Reception%20Center%20for,%2C%20is%20located%20in%20Kutina.>

¹⁹ Additional information on the visibility of transit migration in 2022 and early 2023 at the train stations in Zagreb, Rijeka, and Buzet can be found here: International Human Development “Country Profiles: Croatia” <https://migrants-refugees.va/country-profile/country-profile-croatia/>.

while Dublin relocations from Central Europe to Zagreb have increased following Croatia's Schengen accession. Consequently, the city is increasingly becoming a site of forced return, under the Dublin III regulation, for a growing number of migrants who had previously crossed its territories and managed to reach a Central European country. Despite the prevailing institutional narrative that frames Croatia as a transit country, which has influenced the development of its reception infrastructure and migration management policies (Bužinkić, 2017), it has increasingly become a (temporary) destination for a rising number of asylum seekers and individuals granted various forms of protection.

Sarajevo, on the other hand, became a key site along the route after the closure of the 'formalised corridor'. Bosnian authorities report this trend starting in late 2017, stabilising by 2018 (BiH Ministry of Security, 2021). The decision to include Bosnia in their journey can be seen as a way for migrants to adapt to the harsh pushback policies that characterised the management of migration flows in countries such as Hungary, as well as the end of the open-door policies towards asylum seekers in Germany. With the rise in entries into Bosnia, as migrants sought to reach the EU through Croatia, the Croatian authorities responded by carrying out violent pushbacks into Bosnian territory. This systematic violation of migrants' rights, along with the lack of a dignified asylum system, led to the conclusion that: "On the other side of the EU border, non-EU states increasingly serve as a kind of 'dumping ground' or 'buffer zone' for unwanted people on the move" (Christoph, Jeremić, 2020, p. 9). In this context, the stay of migrants in Bosnia extends over time and is characterised by limited access to services and policies aimed at managing migrant movement within the country. In May 2018, Sarajevo made headlines when a large group of migrants set up tents in a park near the City Hall.²⁰ However, despite the visibility in the public space of migrants travelling through the Bosnian

²⁰ More info available here: M. Lakic "Bosnian Authorities Mull Response to Sarajevo Migrant Camp".20/05/2018. BIRN. Sarajevo
<https://balkaninsight.com/2018/05/10/migrant-group-organising-camp-shelter-in-sarajevo-05-08-2018/>.

capital, the literature has, mainly, focused on the dynamics characterising the Una–Sana canton²¹ (Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020; Helms, 2023), with Sarajevo entering the framework of the analysis as a symbol of the central government subjected to harsh criticism by the people of Bihać, who felt betrayed and abandoned in the management of the impressive influx of migrants in such a small border town (Hromadžić, 2020). Moreover, scholarly work has either considered Sarajevo as a place of return for Bosnian refugees in the post-war period (Stefansson, 2004; Ibričević, 2024) or, by examining internal tensions within post-conflict Bosnian multi-ethnic society, analysing the border that divides the capital from its eastern part²² (Lofranco, 2007; Jansen, 2013). In research on the Balkan route, the dynamics that have developed in the Bosnian capital have remained on the margins of the debate, despite the fact that nearly all of the migrants travelling through Bosnia stops in Sarajevo, from which the trajectories towards the Croatian border diverge.²³ Two Temporary Reception Centres (TRCs) for migrants have been opened in its suburbs: Ušivak, in the Hadžići municipality, hosts families, unaccompanied minors, and vulnerable individuals, while Blažuj, in Ilidža, hosts adult men. These centres were established by the IOM, under mandate from the European Union in 2018 (Ušivak) and 2019 (Blažuj).²⁴ Since that year, the IOM has gained greater visibility in the country and has opted to prioritise cooperation with cantonal authorities over the Bosnian central government (Ahmetašević et al., 2023). Recently, the management of the TRCs have been transferred to the Service for Foreigners' Affairs (SFA) of the Bosnian Ministry of the Interior. The Bosnian capital is configured as both a place of transit and return. As will be discussed in detail in the Chapter Four, violent pushbacks at the Croatian border lead some migrants to choose to return to Sarajevo,

²¹ One of the ten cantons of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, bordering Croatia. The cities of Bihać and Velika Kladuša are located in this canton.

²² Sarajevo East is administratively part of the Republika Srpska, one of the two entities into which the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina is divided according to the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement.

²³ The IOM, in its 'Migrant Mobility Situation Report', highlights the centrality of Sarajevo in migrants' trajectories. Here the report from July 2024: <https://bih.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11076/files/documents/2024-08/wb-mmsr-july-03.pdf> and April 2025: <https://bih.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11076/files/documents/2025-05/04-wb-mmsr-apr-2025-1.pdf>

²⁴ Information on the Bosnia TRCs profiles are available here: IOM "Temporary Reception Centers Profiles". Bosnia and Herzegovina. September 2023 <https://bih.iom.int/temporary-reception-center-profiles>.

which, despite its distance from the border, emerges as a *rest hub* – a place where it is easier to (re)organise in order to attempt the border-crossing once more.

CHAPTER THREE

EU AND THE MAKING OF THE WESTERN BALKAN ROUTE

Introduction

Employing ethnographic regime analysis as its methodology, this chapter examines the Western Balkan route by connecting selected literature, institutional and NGO reports, together with the researcher's ethnographic field journal. Thus, the route emerges as an object of governance, which the European Union seeks to regulate in collaboration with local institutions and implementing partners. This polymorphic space of the route is shaped both by the tactics of migrants, aimed at asserting their freedom of movement, and by the practices of solidarity actors – whether local activist groups, international networks, or NGO workers – who create spaces of support, listening, and care within these territories, in opposition to the models implemented by the authorities.

The first section of this chapter examines the process of regionalisation that reshaped the Balkans following the violent dissolution of the SFRY and the subsequent creation, by European institutions in the late 1990s, of the sub-region referred to as the “Western Balkans”. The processes of cooperation initiated within this regional framework became, from the “long summer of migration” in 2015 onwards, the foundation for governing migrants' mobility, largely through its systematic irregularisation.

The second section provides a historical overview of EU–Balkan cooperation, with particular attention to the material aspects of migration governance. It focuses on the development of funding instruments, within which migration management has gained increasing prominence. Once these institutional relations and the resulting position of subordination of the Balkan countries vis-à-vis the EU are historicised, the analysis turns to current dynamics in Bosnia and Croatia, with a focus on two case studies: Sarajevo and Zagreb.

These case studies reveal key facets of border externalisation, particularly through the harmonisation of two crucial infrastructures: the digital systems for mobility control, and the facilities devoted to the reception of migrants waiting or residing in the territory. By shifting from the state to the city scale, the analysis highlights the differences between two countries that, since January 2023, have been divided by the Schengen border. The discussion builds on the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter One, advancing a critical analysis of the phenomenon by highlighting the interplay between the multi-scalar dynamics of EU border externalisation and the harmonisation of the digital and reception infrastructures of migration management.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of the proliferation of the “camp model” across the European continent, emerging both within and beyond Schengen borders, thereby blurring them. Nevertheless, experiences of resistance have also surfaced in these territories, introduced here and developed further in the following two chapters.

1. The making of the scale: regionalisation and border multiplication

The changing East and the EU Global Approach to Migration

During the 1990s, two distinct processes occurred simultaneously within the European continent. On the one hand, Central and Western European countries were moving towards deeper integration; on the other, the space of free trade and movement that had existed for over forty years within socialist Yugoslavia was disintegrating. Thus, while some European states were tearing down barriers to free movement, new states were emerging in the southeast, leading to the proliferation of borders across the Balkans (Milivojevic, 2019; Stefanov, Radović, 2021; Jansen, 2023). These developments intersected with the push for European integration that had begun after the end of the Second World War and gained significant momentum during the 1990s. The incorporation of Schengen Border Code into the Amsterdam Treaty “means that the EU now officially has an external border” within a framework of an emerging new form of ‘regional sovereignty’ (Walters, 2002) and the “securitized

preoccupation with migration was at the heart of the new field of Justice and Home Affairs” (Hess, Kasperek, 2022, p. 194). In 1998, during the Austrian Presidency of the European Union, “The ‘Western Balkans’ term was coined at the (...) Vienna European Council and its construction has supplied the Regional Approach with a heavy ideational content” (Tzifakis, 2007, p. 57). The term Western Balkans emerged at a stage when Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina had gained independence from the dissolving Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) was itself collapsing. In 1999, Belgrade suffered intense bombings by NATO, and in the early 2000s Montenegro, through a referendum, became independent. This region, a political creation of Brussels institutions (Milivojevic, 2019), included, by the late 1990s, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, FYR Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, and Kosovo.

Still in 1998, Austria submitted a strategy paper to the K4 Committee (9809/98 CK4 27 ASIM 170), where the terms *origin*, *transit* and *destination countries* appeared for the first time in the section titled “Global Approach, next to the section introducing the notion of concentric circles” (Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias, 2022, p. 159). The document divided the world into four concentric circles and identifies the challenges posed by origin and transit countries. Regarding the control of legal entry options in transit countries, the strategy paper outlined two distinct approaches: the first centred on controlling the means of transportation used during transit, while the second focused on the implementation of the EU’s *acquis communautaire*. The overarching objective of this policy package was to harmonise the migration and border control policies of transit countries with those of EU member states, thereby establishing the infrastructure necessary to contain irregular mobility and, in turn, manage regular entry channels. Western European countries were considered particularly attractive destinations for migration from the disintegrating socialist bloc – in 1998, the dissolution of Yugoslavia had not yet been completed – and the strategy foresaw extensive cooperation with these states to reduce the number of refugees originating from them. Augustova et al. (2023, p. 849)

highlight that, at the Tampere Summit in October 1999²⁵, EU member states agreed that the most effective way to advance policies related to Justice and Home Affairs was to incorporate internal security concerns into cooperation agreements with non-EU countries. The authors note that this decision was driven by the perception that insecurity originated externally and that, to protect both institutions and citizens, neighbouring countries would need to adopt Justice and Home Affairs policies aligned with those of the EU (see also Bigo, 2014).

A decade later, in 2011, the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (GAMM)²⁶ built upon the content of the 1998 strategy paper, with the aim of establishing regional platforms to regulate migrant mobility both intra-regionally and to EU member states (see also Vaughan-Williams, 2015). With the notion of “route thinking”, Casas-Cortes and Cobarrubias (2022, p. 153) refer to an “emergent episteme” among border management actors, policy makers and international organisations, through which “bordering practices and border-like spaces are reproduced along hypothetical migrants’ itineraries. This form of route thinking allows for the operationalization and legitimization of expanding borders across space and time of any travelers’ trajectory under the suspicion of illegality”. This process of border expansion along migrants’ trajectories – subsequently revisited and reconceptualised as the ‘delocalisation of borders’ (Cobarrubias et al., 2023) – intertwines with the production of scale. Drawing on Cobarrubias (2020, p. 3):

“When approaching border externalization, the question of scale stands out given that outsourcing borders entails a process of territorial and

²⁵ European Parliament “Tampere Council 15 and 16 October 1999”. Presidency Conclusions https://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/tam_en.htm.

²⁶ Here a section of the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (GAMM) taken from the communication from the Commission to the European Parliament: “The GAMM should keep its strong focus on regional dialogue processes. They aim at improving dialogue and cooperation between countries of origin, transit and destination, covering all mutually relevant issues and themes in the area of migration and mobility. While the EU Neighbourhood remains a main and broader priority, the overarching regional framework towards the south should be the Africa-EU partnership. Towards the east it should be the Prague process. Other sub-regional processes should be aligned and streamlined accordingly”. More info available here: European Union. “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and The Committee of the Regions. The Global Approach to Migration and Mobility”. COM/2011/0743 final. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52011DC0743>.

administrative expansion of a given state's migratory policy priorities into other states, what in EU terms are called 'third countries'".

The author provides five mechanisms through which the scale of the 'route' is enacted by a plethora of actors and 'knowledge/power practices', via: *i)* the creation of regional forums at intergovernmental level, with delegation of the European Union and non-EU countries involved; *ii)* the role of the international policy development, training, and consulting organisations; *iii)* the production of maps of the route in order to facilitate the coordination and dialogue among the different actors, and to convey a specific narrative on the phenomenon (see also Van Houtum, Bueno Lacy, 2020); *iv)* the establishment of joint policing and intelligent operations; *v)* the creation of financial streams, often through aid programmes or international cooperation projects. This scalar structuration can supersede, or superimpose itself on, previous existing regional designations for funding (Cobarrubias, 2020), thereby creating scalar configurations that become "arenas around which socio-spatial power choreographies are enacted and performed" (Swyngedouw, 2004, p. 5).

Regionalisation processes at the EU periphery

To analyse the overlap between the route and the region in the geographical area known as the Western Balkans, it is first necessary to introduce the concept of "region" and the process of "regionalisation". Drawing from the geographic literature, Paasi (2009, pp. 7–8) claims that regionalisation: "as a practice to distinguish regions by dividing or integrating spaces is continually important in both regional planning and the governance of the spatiality of social life". The author conceptualises region as never-completed, always-in-motion entities, or "geo-histories" (ibid.). The historical trajectory of formation and dissolution of regions was also highlighted by Taylor (1991, p. 186), who stated that: "regions are created, reproduced, and finally disappear from the world scene. In short they are space-time phenomena so that as well as being expressed spatially on a map they must be understood as having a trajectory through time". In their continuous redefinition, regional

boundaries serve multiple functions that exceed sheer territorial delimitation. Indeed, regions “acquire their borders in complex social practices and discourses as part of the institutionalization of region. Borders are hence important as social institutions and symbols, not merely as physical lines” (Paasi, 2009, p. 26).

The geographical literature on regionalisation intersects with critical scholarship that, since the late 1990s, has explored the proliferation of borders – conceptualised as a process of bordering – and the production of alterity, or othering (see Van Houtum, Van Naerssen, 2002). Through this theoretical hybridisation, the regional scale and the EU’s regionalisation process towards its south-eastern neighbourhood can be interpreted as the construction of a spatial entity within the broader framework of the “wider social production of space and spatialised ideologies” (Paasi, 2021, p. 19). As Paasi (2005, p. 3) further observes, the ongoing and shifting creation of the EU’s external borders “may help to affirm a ‘European identity’” in contrast to the diverse range of ‘others’ located beyond them. Regional borders operate as an ‘epistemological device’ by actively constructing distinctions between subjects and objects (see Mezzadra, Neilson, 2013, p. 16). This ‘othering’, process embedded within the EU-led process of regionalisation of the Balkans, has been aptly highlight by Kolstø (2016, p. 1247), who notes that the concept of ‘Balkan countries’ fundamentally operates as a mechanism of exclusion, since the term “always refers to those that are left outside the gates”.

This symbolic and geopolitical logic underpins the evolving Western categorisation of the Balkan region. It began with what Todorova (1997) termed the “discovery of the Balkans” in the late eighteenth century, when the region was imagined as a fragmented and backward crossroads between East and West. Over time, this perspective has shifted toward a more refined internal division between “the Western Balkans and the rest”, a distinction that, according to Rexhepi (2018, p. 932), arises from “the shifting geopolitics of EU expansion and its borders”. As noted earlier, since the late 1990s – in parallel with the creation of the area of free movement conceptualised by Walters (2002) as

“Schengenland” – the European Union has increasingly constructed the Western Balkans as an “imaginary political entity” (Hameršak et al., 2020, p. 17). This entity, situated just outside EU borders, is portrayed as an object of the EU’s neighbourhood and enlargement policy, with a potential future into the EU. Drawing on Jones (1998, p. 27), it is possible to observe the mobilisation of scale as ‘epistemological category’, as a “representational trope a way of framing political-spatiality that in turn has material effects”.

Moreover, by examining the role of regionalisation in EU policy documents, Tzifakis (2007, p. 48) highlights how a range of European instruments have been employed to shape spaces and regions aligned with the EU’s Southeastern neighbours, primarily to regulate its relationships with them. Building on this, Bialasiewicz et al. (2013, p. 62) draw attention to overlapping and multi-scalar configurations, through which countries are grouped into regions and macro-regions – understood as assemblages of smaller spatial units. These processes of spatial configuration are further shaped by the internal dynamics of the EU itself. As Lavenex and Piper (2022, p. 2844) note, both intra- and inter-regional policies are strongly conditioned by member states’ positions on freedom of movement and irregular migration. These stances characterise the EU’s regional integration as structured around a “dialectic dynamics of intra-regional opening and inter-regional closure”, in which the international policy agenda delineates the Union’s influence over regionalisation processes in countries of migrant origin and/or transit.

This dialectic becomes particularly visible in the case of the Western Balkans, where EU practices of standard dissemination not only draw on “mental maps but are also capable of recomposing the political geography of the region” (Bechev, 2011, cited in Lika, 2023, p. 9). In this context, the regionalisation process intersects with the broader historical and geopolitical transformations of the post-Yugoslav space. As Henig and Razsa (2023, p. 362) observe, the dissolution of the SFRY “was accompanied by heightened nationalism, wars, large-scale displacement and anti-Muslim genocidal

expulsions, the emergence of new borders, and restricted mobility, which reconfigured the region's geopolitical alignments and its place in the world".

Thus, the EU's space-making practices – through processes of re-scaling and the “rebordering of the margins of Europe” (Bialasiewicz et al., 2013, p. 63) – lie at the heart of its enlargement policy. This policy governs relations with countries such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Türkiye, Ukraine, and Kosovo, with particular emphasis on the Western Balkan states, for which a dedicated agenda has been established.²⁷ The processes of accession to both the European Union and “Schengenland” have eroded the geography of the Western Balkan region and its persistency through time. Since Croatia's accession to the EU and, more recently, its entry into the Schengen Area in January 2023, questions have been raised regarding the future of the Western Balkans as a meaningful regional category. As Lika (2023, p. 11) observes: “the question arises as follows: what will happen when, finally, all the remaining countries join the EU? It seems that the Western Balkans notion will be brought to disappear definitively as memberships proceed”.

Managing the route within the region

The above-mentioned EU top-down construction and its rebordering of the neighbouring Balkan peninsula, through membership, proved to be an emergency instrument for managing the migration route once it re-emerged from the “shadows and invisibility” (Hess, Kasperek, 2022) during the 2015 ‘long summer of migration’ (Kasperek, Speer, 2015). In those summer months, approximately one million people arrived in Greece and, from there, travelled through the Balkans to reach mainly Austria, Germany, and Sweden. In February 2016, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and the Ministers of Interior s of Austria, Croatia, and Slovenia (three EU countries) and their respective of six Western

²⁷ European Commission. “Enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans”. Aid, Development cooperation, Fundamental rights https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/enhanced-eu-engagement-western-balkans_en.

Balkan countries, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, agreed at the conference *Managing Migration Together*²⁸ that the “‘migration flow along the Western Balkans route’ needed ‘to be substantially reduced with a view to alleviating disproportionate burdens on the partners along the route’” (Zoppi, Puleri, 2022, p. 10). Later, on 18th March 2016, the European Council and Türkiye agreed on the *EU–Turkey Statement and Action Plan*²⁹, which aimed at constraint migrants’ mobility in Türkiye, leading to the ‘closure of the official corridor’ (Beznec et al., 2020) and returned to a ‘clandestine mode’ of mobility along the route (Hess, Kasperek, 2022).

The willingness, which emerged in early 2016, of core EU countries to implement policies along the route to restrict migrant mobility and control borders, leveraged on mobility governance agreements previously implemented in the region as part of the EU accession process. Indeed, as Hameršak et al. (2020, p. 18) 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”. The unequal relationship in which the Western Balkan countries found themselves since the spring of 2016 is framed by Beznec and Kurnik (2020, p. 41) as a: “colonial relation in the subordinate position of local (Balkan) powers in charge of restoring the EUropean border regime on behalf of EU core states and powers”. This dynamic is enacted through the irregularisation of migrants’ mobilities and the “transformation of trajectories into routes”– that is, the reconfiguration of migrants’ journeys into “objects of policy” and “spaces of governance” (Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias, 2022, p. 173). Drawing on Cobarrubias (2020), who highlights the

²⁸ Republic of Austria. Federal Ministry of the Interior. “Managing Migration Together”. 24/02/2016. Vienna https://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Zentrale/Aussendungen/2016/Westbalkankonferenz_Draft_Declaration_Letztfassung.pdf.

²⁹ Legislative Train Schedule. European Parliament. “EU-Turkey Statement and Action Plan” <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-towards-a-new-policy-on-migration/file-eu-turkey-statement-action-plan>.

salience of scale in analysing the externalisation of European borders to third countries, I introduce here a theme that will be further explored in the following sections: the role of financial instruments in governing migration routes. Indeed, through the *Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance* (IPA) funding stream, European institutions have mobilised scalar categories to spatially frame both the problem (irregular migration within IPA beneficiary states) and the proposed solutions (technology and policy transfer). In doing so, they delineate which actors are to be included, and which are excluded or criminalised, thereby reconfiguring “relations of power and coalesce political processes around particular scalar orders” (Moore, 2008, p. 218).

In conclusion, within the externalisation of EU “migration crisis” (Tazzioli, De Genova, 2016) into non-EU neighbouring countries, the Western Balkan route has been produced as a peculiar socio-spatial arena, shaped both by migrants’ border crossings as well as by the EU migration governance made out of “logic, legislation, investment” (Hameršak et al., 2020, p. 17), as well as the transfer of surveillance technologies and expertise (Milivojevic, 2019; BVMN, 2023). The following paragraphs analyse the policies that have shaped relations between the EU and the countries of the Western Balkans, and the financial transfers that have supported the construction of socio-technical infrastructures aimed at identifying and marginalising migrants in these territories.

2. EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans

Situating the EU-Western Balkan cooperation

The relations between the European Union and the Western Balkan countries are not exclusive but occur in a competitive international context. They coexist alongside, and in some cases compete with, the involvement of other states such as China – which in recent years has channelled significant investment into the region through its Belt and Road Initiative – as well as Russia, Türkiye, and Saudi Arabia (see Badescu, 2016; Rant et al., 2020). Starting from the early 2000s, the EU has faced both internal and external challenges that first distanced it and then brought it closer to the WB countries.

Stanicek and Tarpova (2022) cite the 2008–2009 financial crisis as the internal challenge that slowed down the EU enlargement process. The crisis, combined with the inability or unwillingness of the Western Balkan political elites to fulfill the accession criteria, have created the ‘enlargement fatigue’ (O’Brennan, 2014), which halted the European thrust eastwards. The void left by the EU has been filled by other international players, such as China and Russia: “China began to spread its economic and political roots in the Balkans during the global financial crisis and intensified cooperation amid the coronavirus pandemic and consequent health crisis” (Stanicek, Tarpova, 2022, p. 2).

According to Pavličević (2019, p. 460), the European Union renewed its focus on the Western Balkans in the response of the ‘migrant crisis’ and the subsequent increase in refugee arrivals to member states: “Managing migration flows also required intensifying dialogues with the Western Balkans and ensuring compliance of their approach to the migrant crisis with those of the EU”. Notably, as early as 2014, the EU had already enhanced its engagement in the region through the launch of the *Berlin Process* – a platform for high-level cooperation between senior representatives of the Western Balkan Six (WB6) and their counterparts in the host countries of the Berlin Process. The initiative also involves EU institutions, international financial institutions, as well as actors from civil society, youth organisations, and the business sector across the region.³⁰ Following Pavličević, this framework prioritised four key objectives: *i)* the synchronisation of the WB countries’ foreign policy with the EU’s; *ii)* the increase in EU investment directed to regional infrastructures; *iii)* the integration of the WB into the European transport and energy network; and *iv)* legislative and technical support for economic development. The successful implementation of this agenda paves the way for potential EU accession: “it is precisely in relation to the policy areas perceived to be both channels and expressions of China’s influence in Balkans – that is, foreign policy, infrastructure and

³⁰ German Cooperation. Western Balkan Summit. “What is the Berlin Process?”
<https://www.berlinprocess.de/en/what-is-the-berlin-process>

physical connectivity, and finances and investment – where Brussels has reformulated its agenda, so as to bind the Western Balkan states to its own policies and objectives” (Pavlićević, 2019, p. 461).

Thessaloniki Declaration and the development of financial instruments

After outlining the context, it is useful to take a step back. A pivotal moment occurred in June 2003, when the EU–Western Balkans Summit culminated in the Thessaloniki Declaration, which affirmed that “the future of the Balkans is within the European Union”. Moreover, at the Summit, the institutional actors agreed on ten programmatic principles and shared values, intended as the foundations for the accession of the Western Balkan countries to the EU. In the Declaration, the participants acknowledge that the *Stabilisation and Association Process* (SAP) would be the framework for European course of the WB countries. The SAP had three main aims: *i)* stabilising the countries and facilitating their swift transition to a market economy; *ii)* promoting regional co-operation; and *iii)* preparing countries for EU membership (EU Delegation to BiH, 2019). The EU – already in the framework of the Thessaloniki Summit – raised the issue of ethnic tensions and their overcoming in view of a future membership; indeed, the Declaration (2003, p. 2) states: “Fragmentation and divisions along ethnic lines are incompatible with the European perspective, which should act as a catalyst for addressing problems in the region”.

Between 2000–2006 *Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilisation* (CARDS) programme represented the main European instrument of financial assistance for the WB, covering Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo and Albania. Created in 2000 by Council Regulation 2666/2000, CARDS was the financial instrument of the SAP, with a total €5.13 billion secured for all actions (Djurović 2020, p. 84). For example, the progress achieved by Bosnia in the SAP led to the establishment of a contractual relationship between the country and the EU known as the *Stabilisation and Association Agreement* (SAA) signed in June 2008. Mišćević and Mrak (2017, p. 195) note that “the SAAs of the WB countries have a strong

regional dimension”, aimed at stabilising the area through regional cooperation and improving neighbourly relations among WB countries.

Beginning with the *Multi-Annual Financial Framework* (MFF) 2007–2013, the *Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance* (IPA I) became the primary mechanism through which the EU supports reforms in those countries that are in the process of joining or potentially joining the European Union.

The IPA I included EU candidate and potential candidate countries, with ministries, local and national authorities, NGOs, and associations as the main users of the resources. Through IPA I, €11.5 billion were invested into candidate and potential candidate countries. Financial transfers were provided through five components, the second of which, Regional and Cross-border Cooperation, aimed to “strengthen stability and security to all country in the region in order to promote harmonious, balanced and sustainable development” (Djurović, 2020, p. 89). Within the objectives of the cross-border cooperation emerges the effort to strengthen the security of national borders.

IPA II (2014–2020 MFF) continued to support EU enlargement policy, aligning candidate countries reforms towards EU values and regulations. In IPA II, the distinction between candidate and potential candidate countries was dropped, reflecting the increasingly unclear EU enlargement timetable (Mišćević, Mrak, 2017). IPA actions were implemented through various management modes: *i)* direct management by the European Commission; *ii)* indirect management with international organisations (IOM, UNDP, SIDA, World Bank, etc.); *iii)* direct budget support; and *iv)* indirect management with beneficiary country involved. IPA II was change-oriented, transitioning from country-based to performance-based allocations and the introduction of performance reward mechanism shifted the paradigm of beneficiaries to think more about the end results and impacts.

The 2021–2027 MFF introduced the IPA III, which continues to support the beneficiaries in adopting and implementing key policies with €12,565 billion allocated. IPA III builds on the objectives

established under IPA II and is structured into four windows. The first, *Rule of Law, Fundamental Rights and Democracy*, includes Thematic Priority 4: *Migration and Border Management*. The language employed by the European Union highlights the significance of Window 1 and underscores the central role of border security:

“Rule of law is a key benchmark against which progress of IPA III beneficiaries’ on their European path is assessed. Migration management, asylum and border management are all important elements of the broader rule of law area, covered by Chapter 24 of the EU *acquis*. The IPA III Programming Framework Window 1 Thematic Priority 4 - Migration and border management recognises the importance of enhancing IPA III beneficiaries’ capacities in the area of migration management, asylum and border management. As such, these are central to the EU’s engagement with the Western Balkans” (Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, 2022b, p. 4).

The political dimension of the EU-Western Balkan cooperation

Following the overview of the evolution of the financial instruments employed by the EU to support its enlargement policy, attention turns to the political dimension of EU–WB cooperation. The New Approach to EU accession negotiations, shaped during Croatia’s accession process, introduced opening benchmarks (to initiate negotiations on a chapter) and closing benchmarks (to provisionally conclude it). Mišćević and Mrak (2017) interpret this innovation as evidence of the increasing influence of EU member states over accession negotiations. Furthermore, the rule of law – as elaborated in Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and Chapter 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security) – must be addressed from the outset. In practice, this means that these two chapters are now the first to be opened and the last to be closed (Mišćević and Mrak, 2017, p. 196).

The significance of Chapter 24 – particularly the prioritisation of migration and border management – warrants careful consideration, especially in relation to the objective of aligning candidate countries

with European standards of rights protection and democratic governance. This emphasis on border security management reflects the broader territorialisation dynamics of the European Union, as analysed by Hess and Kasparek (2022) and discussed in Chapter One of this dissertation. Following the signing of the Amsterdam Treaty in 1999 – and to echo the authors’ formulation – “Taken together with the communitarization of migration and asylum policies, the EU had suddenly become territorial, and a securitized preoccupation with migration was at the heart of the new field of Justice and Home Affairs, or, as the Treaty of Amsterdam labeled it, the yet-to-emerge Area of Freedom, Security and Justice” (Hess and Kasparek, 2022, p. 194). As Balibar (2009, p. 192) reminds us, historically, in the formation of the ‘European model’ of nation-state, territory – together with the ‘invention of borders’ – is inseparable from the “institution of power as sovereignty”. On the other hand, by outlining the stubbornness of migrants (Mezzadra, 2020), these forms of territorialisation that have accompanied the European integration process are continuously challenged by migrants’ mobility tactics, that have been conceptualised as forms of ‘deterritorialisation’. These unruly mobilities demand ongoing interventions by the states concerned, aimed at reaffirming and expanding the border regime (see Casas-Cortes et al., 2015).

Finally, this discussion frames the subordinated and colonial relationship between the Western Balkan countries and the European Union, laying the groundwork for subsequent sections. Beyond an analysis of the bordering and othering processes embedded in the EU’s *scalar project* (Moore, 2008), the next section will investigate the material dimensions of the spatial production of the Western Balkan route. Conceived as a space of mobility governance, this involves the harmonisation of infrastructures of control and reception along migrant trajectories. The route is thus constructed not only discursively, but also materially, through funding mechanisms aimed at aligning migration control and asylum management policies – both among EU member states and between them and candidate countries.

3. Funds for surveillance: the Bosnian case

Harmonising digital and normative infrastructures

In 2016, Bosnia and Herzegovina submitted its application to join the EU, and since then it has been required to meet 14 key priorities. The introduction of the European Commission's country report 2021 presents the situation regarding policy implementation by Bosnian authorities five years after the submission:

“The public political commitment of the authorities at all levels of government to the strategic goal of European integration has not been turned into concrete action, as political leaders continued to engage in divisive rhetoric and unconstructive political disputes, which have hindered progress on the 14 key priorities so far” (European Commission, BiH Report, 2021, p. 3).

The terms “divisive rhetoric” and “unconstructive political disputes” echo the 2003 Thessaloniki Declaration and the enduring divisions within the Bosnian political and institutional framework, extending from the post-war period to the present day. From a decolonial perspective, Majstorović and Vučković (2016) outline the paternalistic approach adopted by European institutions towards BiH, reflected in official documents that frequently portray the country as ‘slow’ and ‘behind schedule’ along its ‘road to Europe’. Building on this asymmetrical relationship between Bosnia and the European Union, this section focuses on the role of IPA in harmonising Bosnia's infrastructures with the European border and migration regime. As already noted, it was only in late 2017 that the country emerged as a major transit hub for migrants, following the harsh pushbacks carried out by Hungarian and Croatian authorities and the end of the open-door policy towards refugees in Central European countries.

In Bosnia, IPA funds have proven important in providing assistance in reforms through financial and technical help. Notably, 40.4% of the 552.1 million EUR of IPA II funds (about EUR 223.2 million)

were allocated to strengthening democracy and governance, the rule of law and fundamental rights (European Commission, 2018a, p. 55). In 2018, the European Commission adopted the *Revised Indicative Strategy Paper for Bosnia and Herzegovina (2014–2020)*, which sets the priorities for the EU financial assistance to the country within the framework of IPA II. The Commission emphasised: “In line with the external dimension of EU’s migration policy, IPA II support should address legal migration, the development of functioning asylum systems, the improvement of integrated border management (IBM), and better management of irregular migration through both focused actions and technical assistance” (European Commission, 2018a, p. 25). Through IPA II funds, EASO, in partnership with Frontex, IOM and UNHCR, implemented a two years project (July 2019–June 2021) aiming at “further build institutional capacities and operations of the relevant institutions coming in first and second points of contact with migrants and persons in need of international protection that is in full respect of fundamental rights and international standards”³¹.

Moreover, through IPAII, the European Commission supported the establishment of an “Automated Fingerprint and Palm Print Identification System (AFIS/APIS)”³² in BiH. Reviewing the project fiche, this action falls under the sector of “rule of law and fundamental rights” and was financed with €3,500,000. The significant objective, under the general policy goals, is “participation development/good governance”. AFIS technology is implemented within the securitarian narrative:

“The safety of citizens, especially after frequent terrorist attacks worldwide, and the increased number of serious criminal acts, are some of the main reasons to raise the security level in the society. The AFIS/APIS system implementation directly ensures additional safety of citizens, thereby

³¹ IPA II project ‘*Regional Support to Protection-Sensitive Migration Management systems in the Western Balkans and Turkey*’ (July 2019 – June 2021) – Phase II https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/IPA-II-phase-II.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

³² The full document available here: European Commission. (2018b). “Bosnia and Herzegovina EU support to the establishment of an automated fingerprint and palm print identification system (AFIS/APIS)”. Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA II) 2014–2020. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/dff1065c-7fa4-4775-8657-aab0885f40e3_en?filename=ipa_2018_41501_ad7_bih_eu_support_to_the_establishment_of_afisapis_.pdf.

facilitating the work of police and judicial authorities, especially in the process of biometric identification of perpetrators of criminal acts, i.e. persons whose identity needs to be determined at an early stage of the investigation” (European Commission, 2018b, p. 4).

The implementation of this technology is found to be in line with the *Europe 2020* strategy, which “recognizes the safety of society and the state as a prerequisite for achieving competitiveness and growth. Establishing effective border management, appropriate public policies on asylum, migration and visas, along with the fight against various types of crime (organized crime, trafficking in human beings, drug abuse and trafficking, cybercrime, money laundering, corruption) will enable the establishment of more prosperous economy and society” (ibid., p. 6).

StateWatch notes that the AFIS system “allows for the automatic recognition of fingerprints and is a prerequisite for the implementation of the Eurodac database”³³. After Serbia, in order to improve its capacities in terms of data collection related to migration, Bosnia “has received a total of €17 million from the IPA fund between 2015 and 2020, with the ultimate objective of implementing an operational database, an analytical tool and a system for monitoring migrants’ biometric data”³⁴. It should be noted that only member states can share information through the Eurodac database. Why, then, is the European Union promoting the development of digital infrastructure to support the use of Eurodac in countries that currently lack a clear prospect of EU membership? According to the European Commission, this implementation forms part of its broader support to candidate and potential candidate countries in the area of asylum and reception capacity – domains in which Eurodac and the Dublin relocation system are considered essential tools for assessing and managing

³³ Full analysis available here: StateWatch “Blackmail in the Balkans: how the EU is externalising its asylum policies”. Analyses. 01/06/2021

<https://www.statewatch.org/analyses/2021/blackmail-in-the-balkans-how-the-eu-is-externalising-its-asylum-policies/>.

³⁴ Ibid.

“secondary movements”.³⁵ While, according to BVMN (2023), the implementation of what they term ‘Balkandac’ is essentially part of the outsourcing of asylum claims to so-called ‘safe third countries’ – states that, at least on paper, are aligned with European standards on reception conditions and asylum guarantees, despite not yet being members of the EU.³⁶

Reaffirming efforts to improve border control operations, the Bosnian Council of Ministers’ *Strategy for Integrated Border Management* (2019–2023) allocates IPA funds to: *i*) integrate or rehabilitate video surveillance system at the international border crossing points; *ii*) provide Bosnian border police with technical equipment for border surveillance; and *iii*) upgrade part of the existing Information System on Migration. This aligns with the European Commission’s *Annual Action Programme for Bosnia and Herzegovina for the year 2020*, specifically Action 4, aimed at enhancing IT capacity and border security, with the expected result of “faster and safer cross-border traffic and more effective fight against illegal migration and cross-border crime” (Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, 2024, p. 13). Moreover, since 2018, the EU has provided over €140 million³⁷ directly to assist the country’s authorities in provide shelter, food, water and sanitation, health, and strengthening migration management capacities.

³⁵ European Commission. “Migration routes: Commission proposes Action Plan for cooperation with Western Balkans to address common challenges”. Press Release, 05/12/2022
https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/ga/ip_22_7447.

³⁶ In the case of Bosnia, mention can be made of the EU’s support, through IPA II funds, in establishing the AFIS/APIS system which is the prerequisite for integration into EURODAC (European Commission, 2018b). Moreover, the Border Violence Monitoring Network report outlines that: “[u]nder IPA 2020, the EU provided 2.5 million euros for the “upgrading and expansion of the Migration Information System through the expansion of the biometrics module and security and availability of data in MIS”. This second part included the delivery of an AFIS/APIS system, and of biometric identification and registration modules to 120 locations in BiH, especially to the Ministry of Security, to border crossing points, to border police units, to the Service for Foreigners’ Affairs, and to the “Asylum sector”. 121 fingerprint scanners, as well as 121 document readers and 131 computers were planned to be provided to BiH. While the call for tenders was eventually cancelled in November 2021, this project is still relevant in understanding the broader goal of developing biometric registration capacities in BiH” (BVMN, 2023, p. 57).

³⁷ IOM, Bosnia and Herzegovina. “Further advancement towards independent migration management in Bosnia and Herzegovina”. News 19/09/2023.
<https://bih.iom.int/news/further-advancement-towards-independent-migration-management-bosnia-and-herzegovina>.
See also: Reliefweb. “ECHO Factsheet – Bosnia and Herzegovina – Last updated: 05/09/2023”. News and Press release
<https://reliefweb.int/report/bosnia-and-herzegovina/echo-factsheet-bosnia-and-herzegovina-last-updated-05092023>.

IPA III (2021–2027 MFF) retains the division of funds into thematic streams, with the first priority focusing on “rule of law, fundamental rights, and democracy”. Under this priority, Item 4 highlights the specific focus on “migration and border management” (Djurović, 2020, p. 102). According to Annex 1 to the Commission’s implementing decision on the financing of Bosnia’s 2021 annual action plan, migration, border management, and mine action are addressed within the same framework. At the general level, the main objective is “participation development and good governance”, while at a more micro-policy level, the focus shifts to “migration”, with the significant objective being “social inclusion and human development”, allocated an estimated budget of €15 million.

Bosnia faces various cross-border criminal activity, heightening its responsibility in Integrated Border Management (IBM). As highlighted by the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (2022a, p. 4) “One of the crucial tasks of responsible institutions regarding implementation of the IBM Strategy is the development of technical and infrastructural capacities for the implementation of the IBM within the context of further preparation for the EU accession of BiH”. The actions outlined in Annex 1 are designed to complement Bosnia’s national strategies, such as the above-mentioned *Strategy for integrated border management in Bosnia and Herzegovina for period 2019–2023* that aims “to ensure the unimpeded movement of people and goods across the national border whilst preventing all forms of illegal activity linked to crossing the national border” (ibid., p. 6). According to the document and based on the planned activities, Outcome 1 specifies: “Capacities of competent institutions in the areas of overall migration management, the fight against organised crime, and other irregular activities in BiH are further strengthened”. To achieve this outcome, the EU will provide upgraded and modern equipment.

“The national authorities dealing with migration challenges need to cover a range of areas and to respond to manifold challenges, so this activity will equip them with (but not limited to): vehicles (special, land, 4 W etc), surveillance and communication equipment, identification system, data management system, tailor-made database systems, online communication

facilities, data archiving and analysis tools; documents processing equipment; upgraded MIS system” (ibid., p. 10).

This analysis highlights the EU–Bosnia partnership as a concerted effort to establish material and normative infrastructures, transforming Bosnia’s role from that of a transit corridor to a recipient country. Within this framework, the European Union projects its four fundamental freedoms – the free movement of goods, capital, workers, and services – beyond its formal borders.

Establishing reception system

In candidate countries like Bosnia, the implementation of digital, legal, and material infrastructures designed to guarantee freedom of movement is coupled with segregational reception policies and securitarian measures intended to curtail migrants’ unruly mobility. Since 2018, EU funds have enabled the IOM, in coordination with Bosnian authorities, to establish and manage Temporary Reception Centres (TRCs) in two cantons of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina: Una–Sana and Sarajevo.³⁸ In Ilidža and Hadžići, municipalities in the surroundings of Sarajevo, two TRCs have been opened: Blažuj for men, and Ušivak for families, unaccompanied minors and vulnerable individuals. The poor living conditions within the facilities are primarily reported by the migrants themselves when accessing the services provided by NGOs. Two illustrative examples are as follows:

Today I encountered two guys from Morocco who speak Italian. They had spent many years living in Italy, but for various reasons had returned to their country of origin. Now, they are once again undertaking the journey back to Italy. They are looking for different pieces of equipment. Winter season is approaching, in these days people are trying their last Game before the onset of the cold weather. An increasing number of people are coming to use the showers. In the camp, hot water is only available for a couple of hours early

³⁸ More info on funds to open the TRCs available here: IOM, Bosnia and Herzegovina. “Information on the implementation of the projects related to Emergency Response to the Migrant and Refugee Situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina funded by the European Union”. News 13/01/2021. https://bih.iom.int/news/information-implementation-projects-related-emergency-response-migrant-and-refugee-situation-bosnia-and-herzegovina-funded-european-union?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

in the morning. An improvised barber shop also took shape, as one young man began giving haircuts to his mates.

(Excerpt from the field journal, 23/11/2023, Sarajevo)

A young man who speaks Spanish stops by the association. He has been here before. He is from Morocco. He shows us the marks of an assault he suffered. He underwent and tells us that his condition should gradually improve. He appears disheartened. Without the backing of a wealthy family, he wishes to work in order to continue his journey, but in Bosnia he is currently unable to find employment. He also says that the situation in the camp is very harsh. Now, during Ramadan, they do not have the right food to observe the festivity. Both I and a member of the NGO staff invite him to take some sardines, dates, and fruit before leaving, but he refuses. «Life for migrants is difficult», he tells us. He adds that migration policies force them to live like animals. In a mixture of English and Spanish, he confides that his only wish is for a better future – a future he cannot have in his home country.

(Excerpt from the field journal, 14/03/2024, Sarajevo)

In addition to the lack of dignity experienced by those accommodated in such facilities, these structures also influence the temporal dimension of the migratory journey, functioning as a critical political technology of b/ordering and othering (Van Houtum, Van Naerssen, 2002) of the migrant population. Furthermore, the temporal regimes imposed through queues and prolonged waiting periods contribute to reshaping and extending the duration of the migratory trajectory.

Lately, people have been arriving in small groups and closer to closing time. We understand that this is largely due to the meal distribution schedule within the camps, which significantly affects people's mobility. Inside the camps, lunch (a hot meal) and dinner (a cold meal) are distributed between 12 and 2 p.m. If someone misses this distribution, their next opportunity to eat will be at breakfast the following morning. This method of distribution leads to long waiting times for meals and has a considerable impact on people's ability to move towards the city centre. As a result, most arrive in the late afternoon. As the temperatures continue to drop, many people come to the

association for a shower. The director of the NGO told me that we are the only facility in the city offering hot showers... I was surprised to hear this, especially considering there are only two.

(Excerpt from the field journal, 24/01/2024, Sarajevo)

These centres are located in segregated areas relative to urban centres, specifically in the peripheral municipalities of Sarajevo, and have proven over time to be flexible mode of mobility government, capable of being opened or closed in response to evolving needs:

I return to Sarajevo for a short ethnographic stay in May 2025. The first pieces of information I receive concern the low number of arrivals in the city. In connection with this trend, rumors are circulating about the possible closure of the Ušivak camp for families, located in the municipality of Ilidža. It appears that, for the first time since the opening of the TRCs in Sarajevo, one of these centres may be slated for closure – a development that, in the past, had instead happened in the city of Bihać and the Una-Sana Canton.

(Excerpt from the field journal, 12/05/2025, Sarajevo)

An additional factor to consider is that, since Croatia's accession to the EU in 2013, "Bosnia and Herzegovina found itself on the external border of the European Union. This increased its responsibility in terms of the prevention and control of illegal migration" (BiH Council of Ministers, 2019, p. 11). This 'responsibility' has intensified further following Croatia's entry into the Schengen Area in January 2023.

4. Being a transit country within the EU: the Croatian case

Border infrastructures and surveillance

Since migrants' journeys cross territories outside the Schengen Area, their highly precarious condition seems to be shaped by institutional efforts to harmonise national policies and technologies with the demands of the European Union. This process of infrastructural harmonisation produces what can be understood as continuum of violence, temporal injustice and stolen time (Fontanari,

2017; Khosravi, 2018) along the Balkan route – a route that keeps traversing states situated at different stages of EU integration. Indeed, the temporality of mobility within Schengen – in institutional documents referred to as “secondary movements” – is influenced both by the reception infrastructure and by the everyday borderwork (Rumford, 2006), which consists of micro-practices aimed at slowing down and delaying the collection of the resources and information essential for continuing their journey. In EU member states, policies of temporal control are accompanied by those of spatial control. Mobility is not only obstructed and slowed down, but also directed (Tazzioli, 2020). These operations of control and directionality represents one of the core features of the EU border governance. The process of steering is carried out by the Dublin Regulation and by the digital and legal infrastructure that ensures its operativity.

The case of Croatia is particularly noteworthy in this regard, as it offers insight into the dynamics at play along the Balkan route within the EU and Schengen Area. The country has benefited from different pre-accession funds and, since becoming a member of the European Union, has financed its asylum and border management policies through the EU budget. Drawing from Milivojevic (2019) emerged that Croatian police obtained support for an amount of funding equal to €12,070,000 through CARDS and PHARE programme in 2004–2005, and €1,483,000 through IPA funds in the year 2009. Croatian police continued to use IPA I and II funds till the country joined the EU in 2013:

“These funds were provided specifically for the modernisation of border management and the implementation of Schengen policies, through which Croatian police purchased thermal imaging cameras, e-gates for passport control, and a range of border surveillance paraphernalia” (Milivojevic, 2019, p. 59).

As discussed in the Bosnian case, candidate and potential candidate countries employed IPA I and II funds to improve the rule of law and fundamental rights – the priority that includes Integrated Border Management (IBM), combating organised crime, and improving asylum procedure and migration

management. Serbia and North Macedonia, for instance, used them to improve their IT system and border control equipment by purchasing, among other things, video surveillance systems, thermal imaging cameras, binoculars for day and night observation, and GPS navigation devices.

With Croatia's accession to the European Union in 2013, the structure and orientation of funding allocations shifted. The country's priorities have since been aligned with the EU's seven-year *Multiannual Financial Framework*. Croatia benefitted from the 2014–2020 budgetary period and is currently receiving funding under the 2021–2027 framework. The negotiations and outcomes surrounding the approval of the EU budget are, for obvious reasons, closely intertwined with the geopolitical challenges faced by member states. Among these, the governance of migration has increasingly become embedded within the Union's financial architecture. The Croatian case offers a valuable lens through which to examine the broader integration of migration control into EU policy and funding priorities.

The 'disobedient mass mobilities' (Tazzioli, De Genova, 2016) that temporarily disrupted the European border regime during the 'long summer of migration' in 2015 also precipitated a budgetary crisis. The EU proved unprepared to manage the financial implications of this sudden increase in arrivals and asylum claims. As Lang (2022) observes, in 2016, only 1.4% of the EU budget was allocated to asylum, migration, and border management – an amount clearly insufficient to address the surge in arrivals during 2015–2016. During those years, a state of "crisis" concerning illegalised migration across the EU's borders became the norm rather than the exception. The governance of illegalised migration, while marked by urgency and disruption, has become routine – operating through the language and logic of "crisis", yet simultaneously existing in a state of perpetual crisis.

This shortfall led the EU to rely extensively on emergency mechanisms and more flexible financial instruments to respond to this situation framed within the crisis narrative. This situation led to a

revision of the 2015 budget³⁹, in which the Internal Security Fund saw an upward adjustment in its total allocation, with an increase of €69 million in the Asylum and Migration funding line and €141 million in that of Internal Security. In 2021, the Common Provisions Regulation⁴⁰ subsequently established eight funding instruments aligned with thematic policy areas, collectively representing one third of the EU's total budget. Among these are the *Asylum and Migration Fund* (AMIF) and the *Border Management and Visa Instrument* (BMVI)⁴¹, which now serve as key financial tools for implementing EU migration and border policies. Lang (2022) notes the interconnections between the approval of the new MFF and the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. According to the author, the political conjuncture among Member States has shifted compared to the years preceding 2015, to the extent that: “the emphasis of the new MFF is on the fight against irregular migration and smuggling, and border-control capacity building” (Lang, 2022, p. 242). Thus, the current MFF allocates substantial resources to the external dimension of border and asylum control, focusing on cooperation with third countries on deportations.⁴²

In a country increasingly crossed by migrants since the emergence of the Balkan route in 2015, two parallel approaches to mobility governance have taken shape: the reinforcement of border controls, and the establishment of reception systems alongside mechanisms for accessing rights linked to the asylum procedure. These two dimensions – border control and reception – should not be understood as separate or contradictory, but as complementary pillars of the same regime of mobility governance.

³⁹ Gazzetta ufficiale dell'Unione europea. 17.07.2015, L190/1. “Adozione Definitiva ADOZIONE DEFINITIVA (UE, Euratom) 2015/1121 del bilancio rettificativo n. 1 dell'Unione europea per l'esercizio 2015” https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/IT/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L_2015_190_R_0001&from=IT.

⁴⁰ Official Journal of the European Union. 30.06.2021, L231/159. “Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund Plus, the Cohesion Fund, the Just Transition Fund and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund and financial rules for those and for the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Internal Security Fund and the Instrument for Financial Support for Border Management and Visa Policy”. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2021/1060/oj/eng>.

⁴¹ European Commission. Common Provisions Regulation. https://commission.europa.eu/funding-tenders/find-funding/funding-management-mode/common-provisions-regulation_en.

⁴² European Commission. Migration and Home Affairs. “Pact on Migration and Asylum”. 21.05.2024. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en.

While BMVI-funded infrastructures materialise the external border of Schengen through technologies of control and deterrence, AMIF-funded reception policies extend this bordering logic inward, transforming reception into a tool of temporal containment. Let us examine these two dimensions separately, using as a reference the figures illustrating the Croatian government's financial planning under 2021–2027 MFF.

Figure 3.1 illustrates the priorities of Croatian institutions regarding the allocation of funds from the Border Management and Visa Instrument under the 2021–2027 MFF⁴³. In the area of border security, the majority of funds are planned to be directed towards the enhancement and modernisation of 'border surveillance' operations, with a smaller proportion allocated to the implementation of the Common Visa Policy. This asymmetric investment clearly signals a policy preference for securitisation over mobility facilitation. This significant financial investment in border infrastructure has had controversial and often violent outcomes. Indeed, the violent system of apprehension and border pushbacks targeting migrants entering from Bosnia and Serbia continues to be practised and technologically upgraded. This illegal and coercive strategy serves to regulate and constrain the temporality of migrants' journeys (see Hameršak, 2021; Augustova et al., 2023). The CLC (2023, p. 20) aggregating data from different NGOs and the Ombudswoman provides this overview:

“the Ombudswoman notes that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) continue to report on collected testimonies of pushbacks, stating that their number again increased in the last months of 2023. Additionally, as noted in the Ombudswoman for Children's report, the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) documented humiliating treatment of men and women, including physical violence against unaccompanied children, which is also reported by other NGOs. Additionally, according to the Danish Refugee Council data used in the report, 3,323 pushbacks and denial of entries from

⁴³ Info on Croatian budget: Ministarstvo unutarnjih poslova Republike Hrvatske. Financijski okvir 2021. – 2027. <https://eufondovi.mup.hr/financijski-instrumenti-cu-82/financijski-okvir-2021-2027/489>.

Croatia to Bosnia were recorded, of which 10% were of unaccompanied children”.

In this context, as highlighted by Catelli (2024, p. 25), EU Member States have access to approximately €1.2 billion to further reinforce border control and migrant identification infrastructure. This includes expenditures for vehicles, vessels, and, in Croatia’s case, also the acquisition of trained dogs: “The Croatian programme reports that ‘49 dogs and 49 vehicles for the transport of dogs’ had been acquired by 2021” (Catelli, 2024, p. 28). The deployment of dogs in violent border incidents – usually ended up in a pushbacks to the previous country – is not new and it has been documented by NGOs and scholars in different contexts along the migration routes; such as: in Croatia (Brito, 2024), Bulgaria⁴⁴, and France⁴⁵. Such examples illustrate how the materiality of border enforcement becomes increasingly sophisticated, normalised, and institutionalised through EU financial instruments.

⁴⁴ BVMN. Interactive map of testimonies of pushback violence at the European Borders.
<https://borderviolence.eu/testimonies>.

⁴⁵ BVMN. ““The guard then released the dog, who aggressively bit the respondent on the leg””. Calais, 15/01/2024.
<https://borderviolence.eu/violence-within-borders/the-guard-then-released-the-dog-who-aggressively-bit-the-respondent-on-the-leg>.

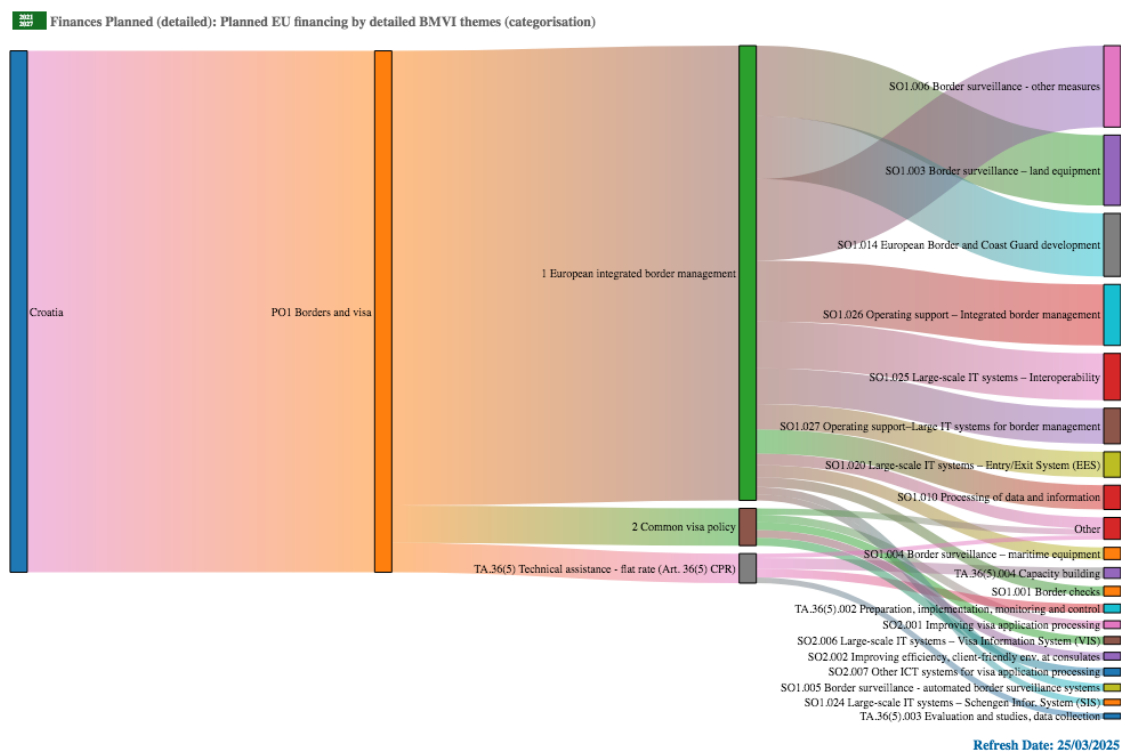


Figure 3.1 Source: European Commission “Cohesion Open Data Platform. Border Management and Visa Instrument (BMVI)”.

Data available online country by country and regularly updated at: <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/funds/bmvi/21-27>.

Reception infrastructure and waiting time

Figure 3.2 illustrates the emphasis placed by Croatian institutions on reception conditions in their allocation of funds under the 2021–2027 MFF. In Croatia, there are currently two reception centres for asylum seekers: Hotel Porin in Zagreb, which has a capacity of 600 individuals, and a facility in the city of Kutina, accommodating up to 100 people.⁴⁶ Once migrants are within Croatian territory, state institutions prioritise the collection of biometric data, particularly fingerprints, and the initiation of the asylum procedure – beginning with the formal expression of intent to seek asylum. Several reports from local and international NGOs⁴⁷ have highlighted that 2023 placed significant strain on the national asylum system, with a record number of 68,114 migrants expressing the intention to seek

⁴⁶ More info on Porin available here: Grubiša, I. “Porin”. 05/02/2023. e-ERIM <https://e-erim.ief.hr/pojam/p-porin-prihvatali-scaron-te-za-trazitelje-azila-u-zagrebu-p?locale=en>.

⁴⁷ Info available here: CLC “Condition in Reception Facilities”. Croatia. Country Report. Aida and Ecre. Last update 19/08/2025 <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/croatia/reception-conditions/housing/conditions-reception-facilities/> and also here: CLC. The Croatian Asylum System in 2023. Country Report https://www.hpc.hr/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/CroatianAsylumSystemReport_-2023.pdf.

asylum. However, as CLC (2023, p. 22) points out, 97% of those expressing the intention or submit an asylum application continued their journey to another EU member state. Even if data indicate that only a small proportion of migrants remain in the country to complete the full asylum process, this massive fingerprinting policy has the effect of activating the Dublin procedure.

As a result, an increasing number of migrants have been subsequently returned under the Dublin Regulation after submitting applications in other EU member states, thereby becoming part of the group commonly referred to as the ‘Dubliners’ (Kasperek, 2016). Data from CLC (2023, pp. 22–23) shows the effects of this policy of fingerprinting:

“in 2023 Croatia received 31,817 incoming requests in the following categories: 28,603 requests (90%) for reacceptance (take back), 2,352 requests (7%) for the acceptance of responsibility (take charge), 293 requests (1%) for information, 453 requests (1.5%) for the reconsideration of requests for reacceptance and 116 requests (0.5%) for reconsideration of requests for the acceptance of responsibility. In 2023, there were a total of 897 incoming transfers. Of these, the largest number of people transferred were from Germany (278 or 31%), Austria (193 or 21.5%), Switzerland (159 or 18%) and France (117 or 13%). The total number of incoming requests in 2023 significantly increased compared to the year before, by 167%”.

Dublin returnees are added to those who have remained in Croatia to seek asylum. The actual numbers of transfers indicate that the phenomenon cannot be understood as a large-scale movement toward Croatia. However, they highlight the country’s integration into European migration governance – a role that, for a state traditionally considered a transit country, generates new challenges, for example in the management of the reception system. According to the country report compiled by the CLC (2022), Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund resources have been used to upgrade the Kutina centre, thereby increasing its reception capacity. However, the number of Dublin returnees exceeds the capacity of the reception facilities. Indeed, for those remaining, or returned, The AYS (2023)

report outlines the harsh conditions characterising life in the institutional reception facilities for asylum seekers in 2023:

“The number of asylum claims in Croatia significantly raised during 2022 and became the highest since the beginning of the asylum system in Croatia. However, the existing reception facilities for asylum seekers have remained unchanged. Within the initial quarter of 2023, the number of asylum seekers totaled 7844 (...). Currently, only two reception centers are available in Croatia, which have become overburdened with individuals in recent months, resulting in deteriorating living conditions for those residing there”.

Notwithstanding the forecasted expenditure for the improvement of reception conditions, the situation monitored by Croatian civil society organisations shows no perceptible progress – quite the contrary. The 2023 report by AYS highlights that many individuals are forced to sleep on mattresses in the corridors of reception centres. In the case of the facility in Zagreb, for instance, there are reportedly only five washing machines available for all residents, a circumstance that adversely affects both personal hygiene and the overall sanitary conditions of the facility.

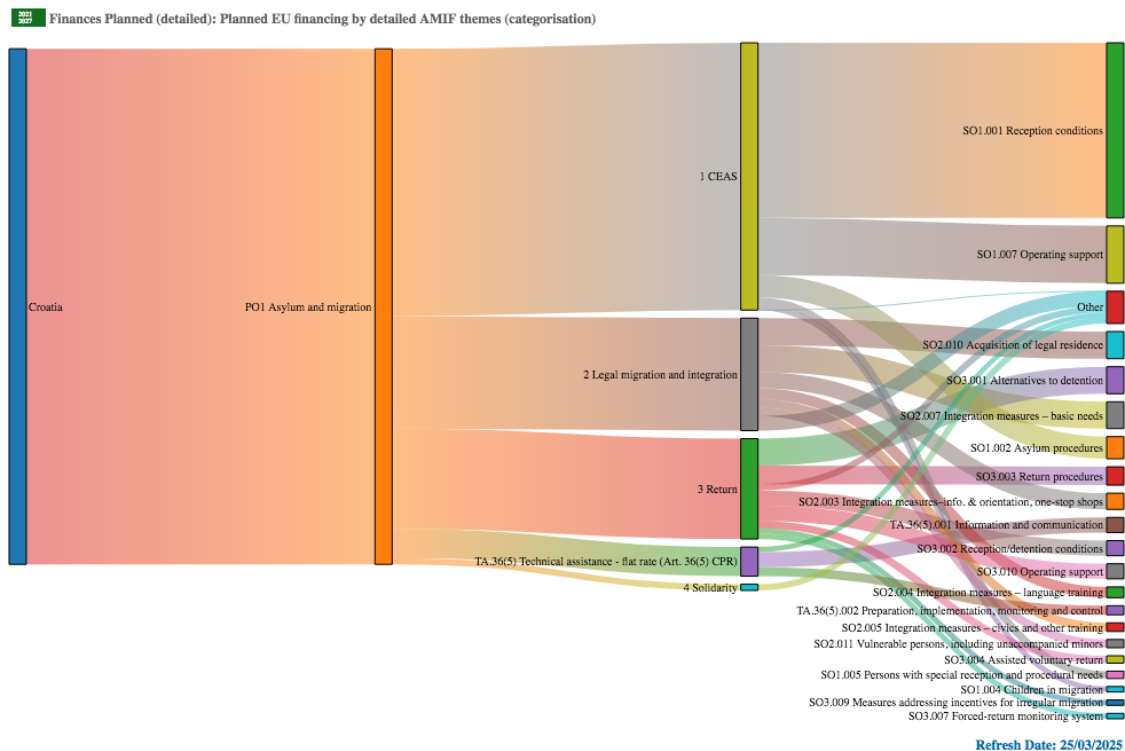


Figure 3.2 Source: European Commission “Cohesion Open Data Platform. Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF)”. Data available online country by country and regularly updated at: <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/funds/amif/21-27>.

In conclusion, it is particularly noteworthy that both the AMIF and BMVI funds extend beyond the borders of the Schengen Area, financing also projects related to migration management and border control in third countries along key migratory routes.⁴⁸ This reflects the material dimension of the EU’s externalisation of border control and the projection of harmonisation policies beyond the territorial limits of its member states. Ultimately, the Croatian experience illustrates how the integration of migration management into EU financial frameworks shapes not only border infrastructures but also the temporal and spatial dimensions of migrant journeys and their waiting. It demonstrates that the EU’s financial architecture functions as a key technology of mobility governance – one that materialises the external border, manages movement within, and perpetuates a regime of waiting at multiple scales. Moreover, this case underscores the persistent gap between

⁴⁸ Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). Call for proposals. 19 November 20224: https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/amif/wp-call/2024/call-fiche_amif-2024-tf2-ag-info_en.pdf.

policy intentions, financial investments, and the lived realities of migrants on the ground. It is also important to highlight how Croatian institutions' perception of the country as a transit state⁴⁹ has contributed to a reception model centred on collective centres, which are often in poor condition and provide only a minimal level of services.

5. The 'plane of struggle': institutions, migrants' agency and activist citizens

Regional b/ordering and othering: 'archipelago of camps' along the route

As I noted in the methodological chapter, my first encounter with the Balkan route occurred in the spring of 2016 at the Greek train station of Idomeni. I was among the many activists who had travelled to this remote village near the border with North Macedonia to witness the physical presence of a 'new wall' (Minca, Rijke, 2017) – a barbed-wire fence erected along the frontier and guarded on either side by the Greek and North Macedonian armies. At that time, the informal refugee camp in Idomeni, which grew around the local train station, accommodated nearly 12,000 individuals, primarily from Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq. In May 2016, what was then Europe's largest refugee camp was dismantled by police and bulldozers. According to Reuters, the eviction was justified on two grounds: the worsening humanitarian situation and the need to reopen a critical infrastructure corridor for the Greek economy.⁵⁰ The refugee camp had become entangled with the privatisation process of the Greek state railway company TRAINOSE and its maintenance firm ROSCO. As one rail executive stated: "The camp has been blocking a route of the Greek supply chain which has taken several decades to be established (...) As long as Greece's main cargo rail conduit to Europe is closed, it is obvious that TRAINOSE's value is falling and the company is less attractive to investors".⁵¹

⁴⁹ On Croatia's perception of itself as a transit country, see the CLC (2022) report: <https://www.hpc.hr/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Croatian-Asylum-System-in-2022-national-report.pdf>.

⁵⁰ L. Papadimas and A. Koutantou "Clearout of Greek refugee camp should reopen economic artery". 25/05/2016. Reuters <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-greece-idomeni-idUSKCN0YG1R9>.

⁵¹ *ibid.*

This episode exemplifies how attempts to halt or decelerate migrants' journeys – through the construction of physical barriers such as fences – came into direct conflict with broader economic reforms, namely the privatisation of public assets initiated in the wake of Greece's 2009 debt crisis. The removal of the informal camp and the relocation of migrants to government-run centres, often situated in disused industrial facilities with precarious living conditions (tents or containers), marked a pivotal moment in the institutionalisation of the 'camp' as a reception infrastructure on European soil.⁵² An 'archipelago of camps' (Anderlini, Queirolo Palmas, 2023) emerged in those years also in the Balkans. Anderlini and Queirolo Palmas identify various forms of camps which, despite differing in function, coexists and are interrelated. Along the Western Balkan route – particularly in Zagreb and Sarajevo, the two cities central to this research – different types of camps (squats, informal camps, institutional camps, etc.) have either cohabited or alternated over time. Moreover, as Minca (2015, p. 80) aptly observes, the camp exerts influence not only within its own confines but also externally, shaping the everyday life of surrounding communities: "The camp is double-edged, like barbed wire". Scholars in the field of critical migration and border studies have increasingly emphasised the pivotal role of logistics and infrastructure in both shaping migratory practices and informing efforts to regulate them (Vianelli, 2022, p. 44).

In other words, what emerges is a 'confinement continuum' (Tazzioli, De Genova, 2023) that links the processes of bordering – fostered through the transfer of surveillance technologies, police training, and policies – with the proliferation of institutional collective centres, or camps, along the Balkan route, both within and beyond the Schengen Area. Along the route, following the closure of the formalised corridor, institutional camps began to appear across the territories traversed by migrants. These facilities are funded by national or European institutions and managed by governments'

⁵² P. Kingsley and H. Smith "Idomeni: Greek riot police move in to clear refugee camp". 24/05/2016. The Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/24/idomeni-greek-riot-police-move-in-before-dawn-to-clear-out-refugee-camp#:~:text=About%20400%20riot%20police%20entered,still%20left%20in%20Idomeni%20overnight>.

authorities or EU implementing partners. The consolidation of the institutional camp model – marked by temporal uncertainty, infrastructural precariousness, and the marginalisation of the populations accommodated – has become a defining feature in countries such as Greece, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Italy. The emergence of this “camp archipelago” thus represents a spatialisation of EU migration policies, where financial instruments and infrastructural investment materialise as technologies of control. In Italy, the northern regions have long experienced transient migration dynamics, involving migrants arriving via the Central Mediterranean or the Balkan route who aimed to reach destinations further north or west. The town of Ventimiglia, for instance, has functioned as a critical gateway to France.⁵³ In these northern territories, recent years have witnessed a proliferation of what the collective Stuck in Transit termed “informal institutional camps” – supplementing existing deportation centres (*Centri di Permanenza per il Rimpatrio*, CPR) and hotspots situated in border zones – a flexible infrastructure of reception which mirror the temporary and collective centres observed in the Western Balkans.⁵⁴

In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the IOM has played – and continues to play – a central role in the management of the TRCs.⁵⁵ By contrast, Croatian institutions assumed direct responsibility for managing migration flows from the outset. Consequently, in both cities under examination, migrants’ stays are typically characterised by life in collective centres located on the peripheries of urban areas.

⁵³ See the report of Amigoni, L. & Oubad, I. “Ventimiglia. Ventimiglia, “la Porta Occidentale d’Italia”, is a porous borderland, displaying an important tradition of commerce, custom, and smuggling activities”. Available at: <https://www.solroutes.eu/node/ventimiglia>.

⁵⁴ Further information on the situation in Italy can be found in the ActionAid report “Centri d’Italia”, available at: https://migrantidb.s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/rapporti_pdf/centriditalia_un_fallimento_annunciato.pdf. Additional details regarding temporary reception centres and “institutional informal camps” in Italy are provided here: <https://stuckintransit.net/>.

⁵⁵ Information on the opening of the TRCs by the EU in Bosnia in 2018 available here: European Parliament. Briefing. “Situation of migrants in Bosnia and Herzegovina” [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/644174/EPRS_BRI\(2019\)644174_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/644174/EPRS_BRI(2019)644174_EN.pdf).

The first difference between the two types of camps lies in their temporality: while in Sarajevo the camp experience forms part of the migrants' 'lives in transit' (Fontanari, 2019), in Zagreb it is configured as a place of waiting for "an unknow amount of time" (Grubiša, 2023)⁵⁶ the completion of administrative procedures related to asylum. The second concerns the structure: in Bosnia, the containerisation of the reception system allows for a certain degree of flexibility in the opening and closing of centres; whereas in Zagreb, the "camp" takes the form of a hotel. As illustrated by the figures presented in the previous section, Croatia allocates the majority of funds from BMVI to reinforcing border control mechanisms. Meanwhile, under the AMIF funds, a substantial portion of resources dedicated to the Common European Asylum System is planned for investment in upgrading conditions within reception facilities. However, ten years on from the 2015 long summer of migration, civil society organisations continue to question the effectiveness of these measures, as reception centres remain overwhelmed and largely inhospitable.⁵⁷

Rescaling an inhospitable infrastructure along the Western Balkan route

While the literature on arrival infrastructures has primarily focused on settlement dynamics in Central and Western European countries, what insights emerge when the analytical lens is shifted to the Western Balkan route? In countries whose institutions are both self-perceived and perceived by migrants as 'transit' spaces, the ambiguity of arrival infrastructures (Felder et al., 2020) – implemented within the broader process of harmonisation with the *acquis communautaire* – becomes particularly stark. Here, the inhospitability of reception facilities is compounded by the chronic failure of state institutions to establish an adequate legal and procedural architecture to ensure effective access to asylum procedures and the rights associated with them. In these peripheral countries of "Schengenland" (Walters, 2002) and in neighbouring states, asylum and reception policies appear to

⁵⁶ Full text available here: <https://e-erim.ief.hr/pojam/p-porin-prihvatali-scaron-te-za-trazitelje-azila-u-zagrebu-p?locale=en>.

⁵⁷ CLC "Condition in Reception Facilities". Croatia. Country Report. Aida and Ecre. Last update 19/08/2025. <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/croatia/reception-conditions/housing/conditions-reception-facilities/>.

have undergone a significant shift: from the institutional management of the migratory corridor – once regulating migrants’ movement along the route – towards the implementation of an inhospitable infrastructure of waiting. This infrastructure not only precarises individuals but also forces them into convoluted mobility patterns (Tazzioli, 2020) or, as in the case of the Dublin Regulation, into unwanted and involuntary movements, thereby contributing to the broader process of European border externalisation (Cobarrubias et al., 2023).

Contrary to the argument put forward by Rant et al. (2020, p. 434), namely that the Western Balkan countries are resisting the EU integration policies, in the domains of asylum reception and border control Bosnia appears, in fact, to align with the securitarian approach adopted by core EU member states. A first example, in the area of border control, is the illegal practice of chain pushbacks, which can only occur within a framework of harmonised, albeit unlawful, coercive return practices among the countries involved. A second example of harmonisation, this time concerning asylum reception, is the widespread use of institutional collective centres that are spatially segregated from urban areas. These centres reflect segregationist policies and constitute an increasingly prevalent model of reception across Central European countries, where the narratives of reactionary right-wing populist parties are fundamentally undermining the right to asylum and dignified accommodation.

Shifting away from border zones – where the violence inherent in mobility governance practices has been extensively documented and analysed in the literature (Hamersšak, 2021; BVMN, 2022; Zoppi, Puleri, 2022; Davies et al., 2023; Catelli, 2024) – the issue of reception, housing and welcoming comes to the fore. Indeed, with regard to this crucial aspect, the region aligns closely with the implementation of policies observed in Italy (see footnote 54), Germany⁵⁸ (Vey, 2023), and, more

⁵⁸ Further information on the German accommodation system are available here: L. Riemer, L. Rau and R. Schalast. “Types of Accommodation”. Germany. Country Report. Aida and Ecre. Last updated 16/06/2025. <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/germany/reception-conditions/housing/types-accommodation/>.

recently, Austria⁵⁹. In these countries, it is increasingly common for asylum seekers to spend prolonged periods in collective centres and institutional camps. These forms of reception give rise to processes of b/ordering and othering (Van Houtum, Van Naerssen, 2002) within the urban areas situated along the migration route. As previously discussed, these processes are fueled by the establishment of collective centres located far from residential areas, often under poor hygienic conditions and with minimal institutional effort to uphold the rights of individuals residing within these territories. The ‘archipelago of camps’ along the route represents the outcome of the “scalar project” (Moore, 2008) through which the EU institutions promote policy harmonisation. This is characterised by an enduring emergency-driven narrative that continues to dominate discourses on asylum and migration across the EU member states. Yet, within and against this inhospitable infrastructure, alternative circuits of care and mobility have emerged – fragile but persistent attempts to reappropriate space, time, and dignity through practices of solidarity and mutual aid.

Seeing from the ‘station’: arrival and take-off infrastructures

Read from this perspective, the distinction between the inside and outside of the Schengen border becomes blurred; it ceases to be a definitive marker and instead takes on the character of a geopolitical label – one increasingly undermined by cooperation agreements and border externalisation processes. In terms of border and migration management, it results that the Western Balkans region is already deeply embedded within the European Union’s migration policy framework.

Thus, when examining this border from an institutional standpoint, what increasingly emerges is the porosity of this apparatus – its capacity to allow migration governance practices to circulate from one context to another and back again. This illustrates how reception practices, together with migrants themselves, traverse state and regional boundaries, producing hybridised forms of reception that

⁵⁹ Further information on the Austrian accommodation system are available here: Asylkoordination Österreich. “Short Overview of the Reception System”. Austria. Country Report. Aida and Ecre. Last updated 09/07/2025. <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/austria/reception-conditions/short-overview-of-the-reception-system/>.

blend elements from both Western and Central European systems with those found in countries along the Balkan route. This dynamic must be understood in relation to the increasing loss of a fixed arrival that characterises many migrants' journeys across the European continent. While this perspective has already been outlined in the methodological chapter (see Pellegrino, 2024), it is worth revisiting here to underscore how migrants' tactics are shaped by the shifting possibilities of accessing rights and securing a dignified life in their intended destinations. Along the Western Balkan route, the 'plane of struggle' (Tsianos et al., 2009; Tsianos, Karakayali, 2010) takes shape in the tension between the top-down construction of the migratory route as an "object of policy" (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias, 2019) and a space of governance, and the bottom-up production of mobility tactics that shape migratory journeys. This space – formed through encounters, contacts, and word-of-mouth – is inhabited and traversed daily by a multitude of diverse subjectivities. It challenges the top-down production of categories, discourses, and funding streams designed to establish a framework of control and to channel mobility, while simultaneously extracting data on irregularised journeys and their ramifications across countries that are, in various ways, entangled in the process of European Union accession. At the city scale, these conflict dynamics give rise to "local battlegrounds" (Dimitriadis et al., 2021), where European, national, and municipal policies come into tension with local and transnational alliances supporting migrants' claims to rights.

Along the Western Balkan route, rights and their associated guarantees have been eroded, and institutions have effectively withdrawn from the domain of reception and welcoming. However, this space has been swiftly occupied by both local and international NGOs. A third actor thus emerges, in addition to national and supranational institutions and to migrants themselves, with their agency: namely, the citizen who acts to promote forms of solidarity towards migrants during their journeys or their waiting time. In the two areas examined in this study, "activist citizens" (Krasteva et al., 2019) have demonstrated the capacity to identify unmet needs as well as the aspirations of populations who had settled – whether temporarily or more permanently – within their territories.

Through the words of research participants, Sarajevo is conceptualised as a *rest hub* along the route. This notion conveys the idea of a city where migrants can reorganise before reattempting the game, but also temporarily linger in the capital during a journey that, from Sarajevo, branches out towards various border towns. The Bosnian capital has long remained at the margins of media attention, which tend to concentrate on cities along the Croatian border. As Chapter Four shows, this peripheralisation simplifies migrants' lives and makes them more visible, without casting their experiences within the spectacle of a humanitarian crisis.

In Zagreb, by contrast, and partly in response to instances of criminalisation of contact with undocumented migrants, local civil society has mobilised to support those awaiting decisions on their applications for international protection. In the Croatian capital, the infrastructure of arrival is embedded within a three-decade history of integration and inclusion, beginning with the 1991 war and the arrival of refugees from conflict zones. Since 2015, the organisations that have mobilised in support of migrants have had to navigate a polymorphic space (Jessop et al., 2008), which continues to evolve in relation to the process of harmonising national and local policies with the demands of European institutions.

In these contexts, the discreet and everyday practices of de-bordering solidarity (Ambrosini, 2024) connect not only with other urban actors and NGOs, but also establish intra-regional – or rather, *intra-route* – links with solidarity initiatives at other nodes. As will be discussed in the following chapter, solidarity has come to function as an infrastructure facilitating the circulation of material goods, information, political struggles, as well as the forging of bonds and relationships, thereby transforming the lives of those involved in such encounters. Building on Mitchell's argument (2020), this infrastructure actively intervenes in the spatio-temporal dimensions of the journey, often coming into conflict with institutional efforts to indefinitely prolong migrants' temporalities and trajectories.

The spatial dimension materialises through the creation of ‘stations’ – solidarity spaces that punctuate migratory routes; as scholars have noted: “something resembling an underground railroad had also emerged through the multiple but dispersed infrastructures of solidarity” (Fontanari et al., 2022, p. 107; see also Queirolo Palmas, Rahola, 2020). These route ‘stations’, with their regimes of in/visibility, constitute privileged spaces for the study and circulation of geopolitical knowledge concerning irregularised migration. They are sites from which to investigate the “social organisation of mobility”, rather than focusing on its non-linearity (Lindquist, 2009, pp. 9–10), while also avoiding the imposition of a “panoptic spotlight” on migrants’ tactics (Queirolo Palmas, Rahola, 2020, p. 11).

The heterogeneous nature of this infrastructure, as well as the varying visibility of its nodes, is vividly illustrated in Colson Whitehead’s novel *The Underground Railroad*. This is conveyed through a dialogue between Cora, a fugitive, and Royal, a conductor, at a station from which – according to the metaphor employed in this history from below – the underground railroad that aided fugitive slaves escaping plantations in the southern United States branched off towards the northern states:

«I brought you here because you saw a greater part of the railroad than many other people (...) I wanted you to see this too – how everything connects. Or it doesn’t connect» «I’m just a passenger» «That’s right», he said. He wiped his glasses with a flap of his shirt. «The Underground Railroad is bigger than the people who work on it: it includes all of you. The small branches, the big lines. (...) The railroad reaches everywhere, to places we know and others we don’t know (...)» (Whitehead, 2017, p. 328).

CHAPTER FOUR

SARAJEVO AS A *REST HUB*

Introduction

This chapter is juxtaposed to the previous one, creating a tension between macro and micro dynamics along the Western Balkan route. Through an ‘in place’ ethnography and direct participation in solidarity work within a local NGO, the focus here moves to the everyday practices of support and engagement with migrants’ (im)mobility in Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina). The shift also concerns a matter of scale: from the continental dimension of regionalisation processes and the governance of the route, to the urban scale of the local battleground, where migration management models implemented at the territorial level are contested from below.

Rather than adopting a framework limited to the dichotomy contentious/non-contentious politics, the narratives of my interlocutors highlight Sarajevo’s position along the Western Balkan route, its relation to the country’s geographical borders, and the spaces for action that materialise within the specific political and institutional context of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This framing explicitly links the macro-level policies discussed in the previous chapter to the micro-level practices explored here.

The chapter therefore incorporates the voices of seven local and international actors who work or volunteer in NGOs supporting migrants in Sarajevo. Among them are Nejra and Danijela, while Aiša, a programme coordinator, works alongside Danijela. In their everyday work, these local organisations interact with different international NGOs, which employ both local staff – such as in the case of Tajra – and international staff, including Amber, Mark, and Jan. Together, this small community of local and international NGO workers has initiated social initiatives and created alternative spaces outside the Temporary Reception Centres, the only form of institutional reception available in Bosnia.

This community is characterised by diverse approaches and self-perceptions: its members hold varied understandings of their role within the context of the migration route. Some primarily identify as humanitarian workers, while others explicitly politicise their work. Yet, as I observed during fieldwork, these two orientations do not stand in opposition. On the contrary, they interact in a productive dialogue that contributes to shaping what I conceptualise as a solidarity infrastructure. This infrastructure draws on different sensibilities, extending its practices into the urban space and contesting the spatial segregation that confines migrants within institutional reception facilities.

1. The city

Jergović (2024) recounts the history of the Bosnian capital through its toponymy, its places, and the personalities who have shaped its trajectory. Interwoven throughout the narrative are the histories of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires, socialist Yugoslavia, and the war that marked its dissolution. Within the text, the author highlights a distinctive and singular feature of the city:

“In Sarajevo, the poor have never lived apart from the well-off or the wealthy. (...) Unlike Zagreb or Belgrade, Sarajevo has never had residential districts such as Pantovčak, Šalata, or Dedinje; rather, everyone – much like in a Romani encampment – has always lived side by side. Sarajevo was never a metropolis, nor could it ever have become one, because a metropolis possesses both its Versailles and its favelas, whereas Sarajevo maintained the integrity and compactness of a kasaba, a provincial Turkish town”
(Jergović, 2024, p. 127)⁶⁰.

Between October 2023 and May 2024, I lived in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina. By sheer coincidence, I had also spent time in Šalata, a residential neighbourhood of villas and low-rise

⁶⁰ The translation from the Italian version of the book into English is my own.

apartment buildings in Zagreb. While a more detailed discussion of Zagreb follows in the next chapter, this section remains focused on Sarajevo.

Sarajevo's urban layout unfolds like a narrow ribbon between steep hills, a distinctive feature best observed while traversing the city by tram. De Certeau (1984, p. 115) observes that "in contemporary Athens, public transport is called *metaphorai*. To get to work or return home, one takes a 'metaphor' – a bus or a train". The tram in Sarajevo is widely used and for many residents free of charge. In the spring of 2024, after several decades, the municipality decided to purchase new trams, beginning to replace the old, rattling vehicles that had long criss-crossed the city.

Inside these outdated vehicles, one glimpses the geopolitical entanglements in which the country is situated. They are typically second-hand units from Germany or Türkiye, and the signage within – such as instructions for disembarking or notices about priority seating – is often still in the language of the vehicle's country of origin. On several occasions, I noticed, among the advertisements lining the tram interiors, stop names from another city – judging by the language, somewhere in Türkiye (possibly Istanbul?) – superimposed over the Sarajevan landscape visible through the window.

The tram line effectively traces a cross-section of Sarajevo, moving from the Ottoman-era architecture of Baščaršija through socialist residential zones like Alipašino Polje, to the peripheral municipality of Ilidža. In this peripheral municipality lies the TRC Blažuj. Further west, in Hadžići, stands another TRC which accommodates families, unaccompanied minors, and individuals deemed vulnerable. For those residing in the TRCs, public transport constitutes a vital link to the central districts of the city.

With regard to the city of Sarajevo, Walton (2022, p. 312) highlights the interrelation between space and time in the city in the following terms: "Residents of different neighbourhoods in Sarajevo live

in the remnants of different times; these layered times, and their interrelations, constitute Sarajevo as a whole”. The indelible imprint of the past upon the present within the urban fabric is also underscored by Calvino (1978, pp. 10–11) in his depiction of the city of Zaira. Like Zaira, Sarajevo is made up of “relations between the measures of its space and the events of its past”, which, though not explicitly narrated, are embedded “like the lines of a hand” within the city. Ottoman, Habsburg and Yugoslav urban spaces remain marked by the scars of past conflict, in “a severely ethnicized and divided society” (Majstorović, Vučkovac, 2016, p. 147) with an uncertain future within the European Union (O’Brennan, 2014). The city’s linear layout gives rise to an architectural timeline. Jergović, on one hand, offers a stratified reading – through the shifting toponymy and the histories of streets, neighbourhoods, and dwellings – of the empires and forms of governance that have succeeded one another in Sarajevo; whereas Walton, on the other, places them side by side. One text foregrounds the history of the city’s inhabitants, the other foregrounds the urban landscape itself. Along this timeline, one travels aboard means of transport originating from countries that have played significant roles in Bosnia’s past and contemporary history (see Badescu, 2016).

This urban timeline features places that may be characterised as spaces of waiting, which – albeit in different ways – are experienced by both the local population and migrant communities.

I wake up early to reach the Sarajevo bus station by public transport. I get off the tram at the Muzej stop, which has the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina on one side and, across the street, the Embassy of the United States of America. It is not yet seven in the morning. The bus station is on the parallel street, and to reach it I must walk along the perimeter of the U.S. Embassy. On the way, I see a queue in front of what I assume to be the public entrance for visa-related appointments. I glance quickly, but it seems that everyone in line is holding either a document folder or loose sheets of paper. There are about thirty people. (Excerpt from the field journal, May 2025, Sarajevo)

Observing this scene, I am reminded of Jansen's (2009) analysis of the entrapment experienced by Bosnian and Serbian populations following the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the introduction of national passports that no longer carried the same weight. In the post-World War II period, when Yugoslavia asserted its central role within the Non-Aligned Movement (Stubbs, 2023), the so-called "red passport" (Jansen, 2009) enabled its holders to travel widely – as tourists, *gastarbajteri* (guest workers), or shoppers (often to Trieste, in Italy). Within this network of alliances, Germany played a key role in absorbing labour from the economically marginalised regions of Yugoslavia.

The queues outside Western European or U.S. consular institutions today evoke Bosnia's peripheral status. While Bosnian citizens find themselves ensnared in the slow-moving bureaucracies of visa applications processed by Global North consulates, third-country nationals endure waiting inside the containers of the TRCs – temporary reception centres funded by the EU and operated by the IOM. During my time in the city, I observed how the experience of time between the urban centre and its periphery is punctuated by the stopovers within spaces run by local or international NGOs, situated at various points throughout the architectural timeline of Sarajevo.

2. Becoming a transit country: «Why them? Why now? Why here?»

Bosnia was not part of the initial transit corridor during the early phase of the Balkan route. Migrants' preferred paths typically crossed North Macedonia, Serbia, and Hungary. Between the summer of 2015 and the spring of 2016, these journeys were effectively channelled by states along the route, which were tasked with facilitating rapid transit toward Central European countries (see Beznec et al. 2020). During this first phase, Danijela recounts a prevailing scepticism about Bosnia's potential role in the route – primarily due to the dysfunctionality of its institutions:

«But as I said at the time Bosnia was really not included, and somehow we were thinking at it will not be included, you know. We were thinking: *okay the country is too complicated, it's too dysfunctional, too mauntaneirs, too this too that*». (Danijela)

Notwithstanding Danijela's scepticism, Bosnia and Herzegovina became part of the migration routes along the Balkans following the closure of the 'formalised corridor'. According to data provided by Bosnian authorities, this trend began at the end of 2017 and stabilised by 2018 (BiH Ministry of Security, 2021). Migrants' decision to include Bosnia in their journeys can be understood as an adaptation to harsh pushback policies in countries such as Hungary, as well as the end of open-door asylum policies in Germany. Following Danijela's account of those years, a sense of disorientation emerges as she describes returning to Sarajevo in 2019 after a work experience in Morocco, only to find the city profoundly transformed:

«And then, when I came back here [in Sarajevo], my first shock was basically from the airport to my apartment, seeing how many people were at the crossroads selling tissues, asking for money, you know. Suddenly Sarajevo looked so different than when I left and came back like: *what's going on?* And at the time much of the people were coming from northern Africa: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya at the time, Egypt, there were really a lot of people, also Iraq, sometimes Afghanistan, Pakistan, but at that time the majority of them were North Africans. And for me, I remember a lot of Bosnians were asking the questions: *Why them? Why now? Why here? These are the countries in peace, we don't understand what are these people doing here.* But at the same time for me coming from Morocco and working in one of the slums in a cultural centers with, you know, one million people and children especially which have access to absolutely nothing, no education, no informal education, no nothing. For me it was very much understandable where this is coming from. I could understand why these boys are there in the streets, why do they want to reach this Europe so badly».

(Danijela)

Danijela's words illustrate how, for the first time, the Bosnian capital became traversed by a significant number of migrants – highly visible in public spaces – whose diverse profiles generated a sense of disorientation among the local population. Questions arose: Why were young North Africans

in Sarajevo? Why were individuals from countries not currently at war selling tissues at the city's traffic lights? Just months before Danijela's return, an informal encampment had formed right in the city centre, in the park opposite Bosnian institutions⁶¹.

Danijela situates these questions within her understanding of Morocco and the living conditions of the popular classes there. Beyond the harsh conditions in their countries of origin, their presence along the Balkan route can be attributed to what Torre et al. (unpublished manuscript) conceptualise as "anti-geographical routes" – that is, adaptive responses to the EU border regime which have rendered the central Mediterranean a space of death. The authors conceptualise these journeys as anti-geographical, "because they follow counterintuitive itineraries that defy physical geography and challenge the common-sense linearity of geographical connections, thereby resisting the necropolitics of the border regime".

Not only has the public space of the capital undergone profound change, but the inhabitants of towns and villages along the border with Croatia also find themselves living in an entirely new context. Nejra begins the interview by recounting her experiences during the initial days of the route in her hometown, located in the Una-Sana Canton, and her subsequent re-engagement as a volunteer with the Red Cross:

«My hometown was, again, let's say, accidentally on the road. And my house was also really close to the road. First, we were also helping a couple of times in Bihać. And my hometown was not directly affected. But what happened, was that the government decided to build a police point, a place, where they would stop all the refugees who were travelling direction so from Tuzla and Sarajevo and wanted to reach Bihać and Kladuša. So, you need to understand that Sarajevo, for example, is in the middle of Bosnia, Bihać is on the north, near to the border, in Una-Sana Canton, and my city is directly in-between.

⁶¹ M. Lakic "Bosnian Authorities Mull Response to Sarajevo Migrant Camp". 10/05/2018. BIRN. Sarajevo <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/05/10/migrant-gropus-organisinig-camp-shelter-in-sarajevo-05-08-2018/>.

And why is it interesting? It is also because my city is on the border of Una Sana canton. Let's say it was the door of Una-Sana Canton. So, the government decided, because it was one road, leading inside the canton... They decided to put there a police car, with two policemen and to stop every public bus who was driving through the road. Stop the bus, go inside and really profiling people on the skin color, on having documents, not having documents. So that means whoever was ... (appearances) of being a migrant or a refugee was kicked out. So, they let them go out from the bus and they stay there near to the road without any kind of facilities. So, this is the moment I started again being involved in the work as a pure volunteer together with citizens from the village. Until 10 or 15 days we contacted Red Cross because we saw that it is not possible that we do that, it is just volunteers from this village. So, they [Red Cross] say to us okay you have the authority, you have the right to take the uniforms and officially to start to work with the Red Cross». (Nejra)

Helms (2023) ethnographically examines the reproduction of social boundaries between those who are supportive and those who are not within a small community such as Bihać, a city in the Una-Sana Canton on the border with Croatia. The author highlights how members of the community who had mobilised to assist migrants operated with great discretion, as they wished to avoid attracting undue attention amid increasing criminalisation. Furthermore, Hromadžić (2020, p. 167) highlights tensions between the presence of migrants and the local perceptions, which often draw parallels with their own experiences as migrants following the 1990s war, producing apprehension: "Many of the people I converse with tell me that they do not move around the city the same way anymore (...) This link between the perception of current danger and the pre-war atmosphere is only one of many ways in which people in Bihać understand and live their new predicament".

The analysis of support for migrants in transit in Sarajevo is closely interconnected with developments in the border towns for two reasons: firstly, many of the individuals I spoke with had, at some point in their journeys, worked or volunteered in these locations; secondly, for migrants

themselves, Una-Sana and Sarajevo Canton represent significant, though distinct, stages in their “lives in transit” (Fontanari, 2019).

3. The borderlands and the capital

Sarajevo as a “rest hub”

The exploration of the relationship between border and capital begins with the personal experiences of my interlocutors, from which a collective perspective on the border/capital dichotomy emerges. In particular, Nejra and Danijela – the two local individuals with the most extensive field experience – share the view that Sarajevo is not only central to migrant trajectories but that its ‘multiculturalism’ – as the country’s most cosmopolitan city – makes the presence of migrants less visible and less subject to stigma:

«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. Now it’s few days, before it was months. You know, they would maybe work, they would find it easier to get money here, they felt more free, because the border area – Una-Sana Canton – is having completely different rules, different ways of treating people. They didn’t feel free there: they couldn’t rent to sleep somewhere, they couldn’t go to a bar, they couldn’t go to a restaurant...they were expelled from any kind of public life, social life or whatever... while in Sarajevo they could participate most of the time. It was hard – and it is still hard five years later – to explain that Sarajevo is the city that, beside Bihać, at the moment is the only city with the camps and was the city with the first camp in the country. People are transiting through Sarajevo continuously». (Danijela)

The tensions experienced in the border areas of the Una-Sana Canton (Helms, 2023; Hromadžić, 2020) also affect the capacity of solidarity actors – whether local or international – to create

supportive spaces. Moreover, the Bosnian state architecture grants cantonal authorities considerable powers, including enforcing fines, establishing checkpoints, and implementing other measures that restrict migrant mobility and criminalise solidarity initiatives (Marturano, 2021).⁶²

According to Danijela, Sarajevo, despite being the geographic and political centre of the country, effectively functions as a peripheral node regarding migration dynamics along the Bosnian branch of the Western Balkan route. In this inversion, the centre – that is, the place that attracts funding and media attention – has shifted towards the towns in the northwest, along the border with Croatia, where reports over the years have documented the burning of reception centres and humanitarian crises⁶³.

In the following two excerpts, Danijela provides some examples:

«And if you have in mind that in December 2020 Lipa burnt down, and all the people that were in Una-Sana and Lipa went to Sarajevo. So, there was a lot of madness in Sarajevo. And while Una-Sana Canton was getting all the attentions, the people were actually already in Sarajevo. So, we had no NFIs, no money, no this, no that...It was very very difficult period for us, especially to drag the attention towards Sarajevo, to explain that Sarajevo had 3 or 4 times more people than all Una-Sana Canton at that time; that we had no trucks arriving, no support...you know, it took us time to work». (Danijela)

«You picture that, you send videos, you send photos, you do whatever and you say: *please we need support in Sarajevo* and you just get a message: *oh we just got two trucks to Bihać*. There's no one in Bihać (bitter laughs)...you are like: *what the hell*...it was always this issue, it remains to be the issue, but at the same time it makes the work easier and I think it makes their existence in Sarajevo easier. It's easier for them to be here: bigger city, more cosmopolitan, people used more to see different people, different

⁶² C. Martini "Solidarity with Bihac and the importance of transnational ties". 28/09/2021. Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso.

<https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Projects2/TraPoCo/News-Trapoco/Solidarity-with-Bihac-and-the-importance-of-transnational-ties-212980>, and about checkpoint: D. Kovacevic "Migrants 'Stranded in Limbo' at Bosnian Checkpoints". 25/08/2020. BIRN <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/08/25/migrants-stranded-in-limbo-at-bosnian-checkpoints/>.

⁶³ L. Tondo "Fire destroys migrant camp in Bosnia". 23/12/2020. The Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/dec/23/fire-destroys-migrant-camp-bosnia-lipa>.

nationalities, different faces, different skin colors, than for example Una-Sana Canton. The world came to them. It was a cultural shock for these people. This also needs to be taken into account». (Danijela)

The underestimation of Sarajevo's centrality within migrant routes also causes challenges in the procurement and distribution of NFIs, with Bihać and the Una-Sana Canton receiving the bulk of media and foreign donor attention. In other words, the spectacle of the migration crisis (De Genova, 2017) rarely focuses on Sarajevo, and Danijela highlights a positive consequence of this peripheralisation of the capital in the public migration discourse. Despite the logistical difficulties faced by NGOs, the lives of migrants in the city remain less under the spotlight.

Sarajevo's prominent role is also recognised by Mark, a staff member of an international NGO, who, during his visits to Bosnia to plan the opening of a community centre on behalf of his organisation, opts for the Bosnian capital over the border regions:

«So, when our organisation presented (...) the idea of starting something brand new in Bosnia, they just mentioned Bosnia. I did a lot of research...visited Bihać, visited Sarajevo. At that point is when I met Danijela, she was in Bihać. And it was very busy. It was peak time in Bihać. But I felt that Sarajevo would have been a long-lasting point than a border town. I felt it at the time, but I think it is still true, that the hotspot border town is always going to move based on where the success is perceived. So, we have two Syrian friends that have been here less than a month, but a reasonable amount of time, and they just were successful crossing the border via Mostar, not Bihać. So, I think that the route is always going to change. but I think that Sarajevo will still be a...if I can use a metaphor...Sarajevo is going to stay a rest hub on the refugee highway». (Mark)

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, to rest means: "to (cause someone or something to) stop doing a particular activity or stop being active for a period of time in order to relax and get back your

strength”.⁶⁴ The concept of the *rest hub* conveys the idea of a city where one can (re)organise before (re)attempting the *game*, but also temporarily linger in the capital during a journey that, from Sarajevo, branches out to various border towns. Thus, the city becomes both a place of arrival and return – as emphasised by Danijela – and a place of pause. Moreover, this perception of Sarajevo as a place of rest connects back to Danijela’s earlier observations on how the city’s peripheralisation simplifies the lives of migrants and makes them more visible, without casting their experience within the spectacle of a humanitarian crisis.

Connecting to the discussion in Chapter Three, it appears that this *rest hub* emerges from the tension between an inhospitable infrastructure of container-based reception facilities on the city’s periphery and, on the other hand, the capacity of social actors to create favourable conditions for supporting migrants’ stays and the reorganisation of their mobility.

This dimension of rest – and of hospitality – also became evident during an encounter in May 2025, during a week-long ethnographic visit to the city with Luca Giliberti. We were at Kompas to exchange greetings and updates on events from the past year, when a group of young men from Morocco arrived:

After sharing with us the trajectories they had undertaken, the cities they had passed through, and the ways in which they chose to travel, they explained that they had been in the city for three days and that: Kompas is the first place of solidarity they 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. When asked «How do you find Bosnia?», their response was

⁶⁴ Cambridge Dictionary “rest” <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/rest>.

often a succinct yet telling: «Bosnia is good». (Excerpt from the field journal, 08/05/2025, Sarajevo)⁶⁵

This condition of Sarajevo as a place of arrival, departure, and return is also found in other states on the borders of the Schengen Area that are involved in the externalisation of the EU border; one such example is Morocco. Indeed, reading the ethnographic diaries of Giliberti and Queirolo Palmas (2024) shows that Casablanca has a similar configuration. According to one of their informants, those who fail the *attaque de masse* – an organised, group attempt – to breach the barriers protecting Ceuta and Melilla are subsequently apprehended by the police and pushed back south. Like Sarajevo, Casablanca emerges as “a central place in the geography of migratory routes”, a place of returns but also of prolonged stays (Giliberti, Queirolo Palmas, 2024, p. 147).

Changing place, changing work: the proliferation of borders and the violence of pushbacks

In our conversation Nejra offers me an overview of the three cantons involved in the transit, highlighting the spatial differences in the placement of services between Una-Sana, Sarajevo, and Tuzla. The characteristic that emerges regarding Sarajevo is that several services are located within the city itself:

«This safe house in Sarajevo I find it really okay, Danijela is also pretty much in the center, I am also here so we keep us urban and I think that in Sarajevo is really functioning, that we are not targeting that much in this point of view, but other cities are having more problems. In Bihać for example was completely impossible to open a safe house. Even because of this pressure of the local population. In Tuzla they managed but on that way...». (Nejra)

⁶⁵ The ethnographic journal of Sarajevo, written during the May 2025 mission, is the outcome of a collective writing process carried out together with Luca Giliberti, Professor of Sociology of Education at the University of Parma and co-supervisor of this doctoral research project.

Nejra leaves aside the explanation of the situation in Tuzla, as we are both already familiar with it. I had personally witnessed the conditions of the safe house in Tuzla in 2021, during my first stay in Bosnia: a place on the outskirts of the city, poorly connected, almost invisible, where a well-organised network of NGOs worked to provide recreational activities and support, particularly concerning health-related issues. Moreover, following Nejra's reasoning, the spatial shift from the border to the capital also entails a reorientation of focus, prompting the staff and volunteers to engage with different challenges – even though the violence of the border remains perceptible in Sarajevo as well:

«In a way, when I moved myself back or away from the border, automatically I also moved myself away from this direct work with people who experienced pushbacks. That doesn't mean that we do not have people who experienced pushbacks, because here we have daily people who come back to Sarajevo from the border because here they can find better services or more people will help them, they can recover better, (...). In Bihać is much more difficult and the camp is really outside. Here in Sarajevo when they are staying in the camp they can come to the city easily. They are better connected. (...) In Bihać this is much more difficult». (Nejra)

The connection Nejra highlights is, most commonly the tram, which efficiently links the outskirts of Sarajevo with its central districts. During the months of fieldwork, I often found myself recognising familiar faces on the tram carriages – people I had previously encountered during volunteer hours at the association. Moreover, it became standard practice during volunteering days to ask individuals, *«How did you get here?»* – both to monitor movements to and from the city and to understand whether they had arrived directly from the border, and thus from Sarajevo's main bus station.

Encounters with migrants who have experienced a pushback and subsequently repositioned themselves in Sarajevo are a shared reality for those working and volunteering in the capital – something I was also able to observe throughout my fieldwork. The following is just one example, paradigmatic of the violent conduct employed by Croatian and Bosnian institutions in neglecting to

assist an injured person following a border-crossing attempt. In this particular case, emergency care was reduced to the mere prescription of painkillers:

In the afternoon, a group of Iranians arrive – it is their third visit to the association. They recount the pushback they experienced in Croatia. During an attempt to cross the border on foot, one of the young men fell and injured his back. They explain that they tried to call an ambulance, but were met with aggression; no one came to assist them in the forest. He tells me that his girlfriend managed to drag him to the roadside, where they were eventually identified by the police. However, instead of being taken to a hospital, they were brought to what he calls “a prison”, from which they were subsequently returned to Bosnia.

The young man still suffers from back pain and has been unable to access any medical care. For five days, he has been relying solely on painkillers. They are eager to attempt the crossing again as soon as possible, as they are running out of money. I accompany the group to take clothes and we continue talking. He tells me that, in light of everything he has witnessed, he has begun to question the very meaning of the words nation and border. He asks me: «What does nation mean? And border? ... Where is the border? »

(Excerpt from the field journal, 10/01/2024, Sarajevo)

The question “Where is the border?” emerges from the frustration of having been identified within Croatian territory, yet nonetheless subjected to a pushback into Bosnia, without access to thorough medical examinations or appropriate care. To the young Iranian man’s question, I might add another: How thick is the border? These dimensions were explored in the first chapter of the dissertation. The analysis suggesting that “borders are no longer at the borders” (Balibar, 1998, pp. 217–218), but rather “dispersed throughout society” (Rumford, 2006, p. 160), is central to understanding the proliferation of borders beyond the notion of a neutral geographical line (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). Furthermore, their proliferation within and beyond the Schengen Area can be attributed to the European Union accession process, which materialises through technological support and knowledge transfer aimed at upgrading border control systems. As previously discussed, these processes are

funded through IPA funds for non-member states and BMVI for EU member states. Studying borders in Bosnia is crucial because the country sits at the crossroads of shifting migration routes and geopolitical interests. Understanding how borders operate beyond physical lines reveals the complex realities faced by migrants and local populations alike, shedding light on broader issues of sovereignty, security, and human rights in the region.

Internal border

Danijela also has professional experience both at the border and in Sarajevo, and she highlights the same dynamic observed by Nejra: one's location – whether at the border or in the capital – shapes the focus and nature of the work being carried out. However, this border/centre dichotomy proves to be particularly slippery in the Bosnian context. As Danijela points out:

«Because very often at the border you are the first response, like you are really the first emergency response when someone comes from the pushback, when somebody is wounded, when somebody is stripped out of everything, etc. You are the first one to reach out, you are the first one to care, you are the first one to show the support. And this is not what really happen to us here, because when the people come to Sarajevo they are already being taken care by someone, because Sarajevo physically is not the border, it's in the middle of the country, we don't have...no, we actually have a border, we have the entity border (laughs)». (Danijela)

The border Danijela refers to is an administrative one, separating the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina from the Republika Srpska. It is an internal boundary established by the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement. The agreement set the country's external borders with the Republic of Yugoslavia and Croatia – the latter inherited from the Ottoman period (Klemenčić, 2000) – as well as delineated, marked and mapped the *Inter-Entity Boundaries Line* (IEBL). The scholarly literature shows that the internal boundary line had no prior existence in the cartography of Bosnia. Indeed, aside from few

adjustments, it reflects the military frontline between the two factions at the moment of the peace talks' conclusion in November 1995 (Jansen, 2013; Ibričević, 2024).

Critical border literature has explored the multiple ways in which internal borders become manifest (see Fontanari, 2019; Fauser, 2024). In the case of Sarajevo, the “refoundation of urban space in East Sarajevo is fundamentally anchored in Orthodox religion, the Cyrillic alphabet, and loyalty to Mother Serbia – key elements of Serbian identity which, although partially pre-existing the conflict, are now being actively emphasised in opposition to and in contrast with the predominantly Croat and Muslim identities that characterise present-day Sarajevo”⁶⁶ (Lofranco, 2007, p. 94).

The IEBL proved to be particularly ‘hard’ for Bosnian refugees and internally displaced people who, in the post-war period, sought to return to homes located in territories they had been forced to leave and in which they represented an ethnic minority (see Dahlman, Tuathail, 2005). At the same time, it remains largely invisible to foreigners: the passage from Sarajevo to East Sarajevo is not marked by checkpoints, just as entry into the Republika Srpska is signalled not through formal controls, but rather through the display of flags of the Bosnian Serb entity and the predominance of Cyrillic script over Latin on road signs.

The polysemy of borders (Balibar, 2002, p. 79) emerges strongly here, accompanied by a certain degree of ‘ambiguity’ (Bauder, 2017). As Bauder (2017, p. 31) claims: “borders are always tied to particular uses, practices, and experiences. In this way, border aspects always remain connected to their particular contexts”. In the Bosnian context, the IEBL – despite being established within the framework of the Dayton Agreement that has ensured peace in Bosnia for thirty years – has “*de facto*

⁶⁶ The translation from the Italian version of the book into English is my own.

legalized wartime territorial conquest” (Ibričević, 2024, p. 4), thereby creating “mono-ethnic areas” (ibid., p. 15).

The IEBL is the same internal boundary line which, traversing Bosnia and dividing the territory almost in half, reaches the Una-Sana Canton, where it overlaps with the cantonal border, simultaneously assuming the role of a frontier both between cantons and between the two state entities. The village where Nejra lived was situated precisely on the edge of this dual border – not only that of her own canton, but also the one separating the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina from Republika Srpska.

Situating Sarajevo within migrants’ journeys

Tajra has worked in both the Una-Sana and Sarajevo. I asked her opinion on the notion that, despite being over five hours away by bus from the border, Sarajevo is deeply intertwined with the dynamics occurring in the cities of Bihać and Velika Kladuša. In response, Tajra broadened the discussion by framing the five- to six-hour bus journey between Sarajevo and Bihać within the context of a much longer journey:

«You know, someone who is pushed back from the border. I would also go to Sarajevo to get rest. (...) I mean, Sarajevo is a bigger city and it has more opportunities for a person on the move. In Bihać, you have very few options. That is like Lipa or, I know, to go somewhere on these remote locations in some squats. (...) maybe for us, five, six hours by bus is tiring. But when I am talking to them, five, six hours it is nothing. Their perception of time and distance is nothing...it is not like us. I mean, I realised that when Bihać government established this Vučjak camp and you know, police were just collecting people who they found in the city center. And they would transport them to Vučjak so that the locals are...They can see the government is doing something. That they are solving this migrant crisis...They were just moving them from their eyes... And I was talking to them like: *But you need like two hours by foot to reach from Vučjak to the city center.* And I mean, nothing

could stop them. Police would take them. They would come again. So, I would say: *But how would you like...I don't know...Two hours come again here? It's very tiring. It's night.* They said: *Tajra two hours it's nothing. It's really nothing. What's wrong with you? We are like traveling for, I don't know, ten days. And it's nothing for us.* There are people who went to game 20 times...And then I realised, okay it's really nothing, nothing for them. So, for them, Sarajevo, I agree with you. I mean, is much closer to the border. Because they can find here many NGOs. They can find connections. (...) And then just go through Bihać...they don't want to stop there. They are just going through Bihać. And then continue their journey. But you know, being pushed back from Bihać and then, to end up in Lipa again, it's very exhausting. Or, even in Kladuša or in those places. It's very exhausting, it's waste of time. It's waste of resources that they don't have». (Tajra)

In this excerpt, Tajra highlights two aspects that may seem contradictory at first glance: the perception that a few hours by bus is negligible within a journey that lasts weeks, months, or even years. This expanded temporal dimension of travel echoes the loss of a definitive arrival point that characterises the condition of migrants both inside and outside the Schengen Area (Papadopoulos et al., 2015; Pellegrino, 2024; Franchi, 2025). From her experience, Sarajevo emerges as a space of rest, recovery, and planning for the next stages of the journey. However, the impact of continuous mobility to and from the border, coupled with the remote location of TRCs, should not be underestimated. Her observations stem from ongoing encounters with migrants in transit, both in border areas and in Sarajevo itself. On the one hand, there is a notable “stubbornness” (Mezzadra, 2020) among migrants who repeatedly return to the city despite police efforts to capture and displace them – a form of mobility governance through mobility typical of EU countries (Tazzioli, 2020). On the other hand, the “waste of time” inherent in this management model inevitably emerges: a prolongation of travel time that goes hand in hand with increased costs, resulting in a temporal injustice (Fontanari, 2017).

Migration governance and the space to rest

In conclusion, I would like to focus on two key aspects: the first concerns the concept of the *rest hub*, while the second pertains to the urban dimension of border and migration.

Regarding the category of the *rest hub* that characterises Sarajevo's urban environment, on one hand, institutional actors – supported by EU funding and their implementing partners – promote the development of inhospitable infrastructure based on the camp model and on the systematic denial of rights associated with asylum claims. On the other hand, local and international civil society organisations, through its solidarity practices (to be discussed in the following pages), have actively contributed to creating a *rest hub*: a place where, despite their visibility, migrants can blend into a cosmopolitan and predominantly Muslim capital, maintaining forms of sociality – taking the tram across the city, sitting in a café, or strolling through Baščaršija:

During the association's daily activities, it is customary to ask participants how they have travelled to reach us. Depending on one's familiarity with the local area, the most common responses are the tram, a taxi, or a lift by car. (...) I take the tram from my usual stop and board the last carriage, where I encounter a small group of young men whom I assume are also on their way to the association. We alight together, though in the crowd I lose sight of them. A little later, I notice them again on the opposite side of the road, continuing in the same direction as I am, until we eventually arrive at the entrance to the association. On days of high attendance such as these, it is not unusual to encounter migrants who have just left the association at the tram stop, to exchange a brief greeting, and then to part ways upon disembarking – myself heading home, and they towards Ilidža. (Excerpts from the field journal, November 2023, Sarajevo).

This urban hub of rest and (re)organisation is supported by two interconnected 'platforms' (Meeus et al., 2020) that aim to make both the stay more dignified and the journey safer: a take-off platform, which organises the distribution and circulation of travel necessities; and a still embryonic welcoming platform, which, through a multiplicity of actors, offers social and recreational activities, hospitality, and support in accessing fundamental rights for migrants and asylum seekers in Sarajevo. These two

platforms will be analysed shortly in the discussion of local solidarity, drawing on the experiences of Bosnian solidarity actors. Thus, a tension arises between the possibility of rest and inhospitality, which also manifests spatially. While the two TRC camps in Sarajevo are located in peripheral municipalities, local solidarity has sought to “keep it urban” by opening the (few) available spaces within the capital’s central districts.

The dimension of migration and the reproduction of borders within Sarajevo’s urban context warrants deeper exploration in light of existing literature on the subject. In Sarajevo’s case, the significance of the border emerges for two main reasons: firstly, due to the city’s connection to the dynamics unfolding at Bosnia’s geographical border; and secondly, because the city itself is traversed by an administrative border established by the 1995 Dayton peace agreements. Within Sarajevo, multiple layers of borders coexist alongside narratives of departure and return, creating a complex spatial and social stratification.

4. The genesis of the solidarity work

After discussing the relationship between centre and periphery – and its inversion within the humanitarian crisis of migrants in Bosnia – the focus returns to Sarajevo to analyse the involvement of the local population and internationals in solidarity practices with migrants.

The centrality of the capital in migration maps has received limited attention within the literature on the Balkan route. During my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to engage with a small group of people who chose to create spaces of debordering, sharing, and care. My interlocutors come from various places and continents and are motivated by reasons that will be explored in the following pages. Understanding their motivations proves essential for engaging with the literature on solidarity studies, from which two dynamics of activation emerge. The first results from a long-term sedimentation of solidarity practices within territories that inform and nurture subsequent actions arising around new demands. The second concerns the presence of “commonalities of events” – shared past experiences

within a community that foster a particular sensitivity to certain conditions (Tazzioli, Walters, 2019; Giliberti, Potot, 2021; Giliberti, Queirolo Palmas, 2024).

Danijela, when recounting her journeys at the dawn of the Balkan route – during which she and some friends travelled by car through the territories crossed by what was then the ‘formal corridor’ – weaves into her narrative a personal connection with the war of the 1990s:

«We went two times on the route for about two or three weeks in order to see what is going on. (...) I think the motivation behind it was because we knew that the majority of them were Syrian. At that time the country was in war. For us probably the first country that we were watching, you know going through the war that WE were observing through the television and media, the way that THEY observed us in the 90s. And I think this was another impact for all of us...Individual impact». (Danijela)

Danijela revisits this commonality of events – between migrants in transit along the route and local people who had themselves experienced war – in her discussion of the solidarity actions undertaken by Bosnian individuals. Her testimony suggests that witnessing displacement during the war played a key role in motivating her engagement. This involvement, which in 2015 consisted of a couple of trips along the route, later materialised in the establishment of an NGO in Sarajevo.

Meanwhile, in the following excerpt, Nejra situates her mobilisation in solidarity with migrants within a biography marked by long-standing volunteering work within her community:

«My education did not have anything to do with refugee work. So, as I am a teacher, I worked 18 years in school teaching to small kids. But, when I was young I was always connected to – let’s say – the volunteering work, so at 17 years old I was already the president of the youth of the Red Cross in my hometown (...). And I was also educating myself in the first aid, I was organising a lot of activities in the city helping elderly. So, I was doing a lot of activities as volunteer with the local population. This was in my teenage

years. After that I was studying, marriage all the staff, so I was not active. Since 2014, again I started to volunteer in the Red Cross. It was the period of the floods in Bosnia». (Nejra)

Nejra's extensive experience in the humanitarian sector, along with her sustained engagement within the community, granted her recognised authority at the time of the migrants' arrival in her area. At the same time, it provided her with the organisational tools necessary to reconnect with the NGO network and assume a leading role in coordinating the humanitarian emergency between 2018 and 2019.

Aiša, on the other hand, was driven by curiosity and by a desire to address a gap she identifies in both public and intellectual debate in Bosnia. Despite the country having been, for several years, at the centre of migrant arrivals and of migration policies shaped by the EU accession process, migration remains a marginal issue in public discourse – often, as Aiša observes, evoked only in its negative associations with crime and insecurity:

«I think I was in my second year of bachelor degree. And it was right after quarantine was done. I lived nearby [this association] and honestly, I didn't know anything about migration here and migrants situation generally here in Sarajevo. I saw a few times a lot of people just there passing by next to that place [the association]. And, in that moment in my life, I just wanted to give something to society, and I didn't know what exactly. Especially because in that moment I also started to volunteer in one organisation for prevention of addiction, and also, I was working as a baby sitter. And I had a few hours in a day free, and it was on Tuesdays. And even if I am so introverted person, I asked one time one girl from [the association]: *do they need some help?* Because I saw that many times they were just taking out boxes and they were just two or three of them and she told me: *okay we need...okay you can come on Tuesday if you have some time* and we agreed on that. Honestly, in that moment, I did not know why exactly I did that, I was just so interested in migration here, because all I knew I knew from media and it was all in some bad context. Even on my faculty, during those studies as a social worker, we didn't much mention that situation and I knew that social workers are

sometimes in charge of those people and for me was interesting to understand why we are not talking about that». (Aiša)

Regarding the international actors, I find Jan's words particularly interesting. Hailing from Central Europe, he recounts the beginning of both his and his wife's engagement with migration issues – a moral and faith-driven commitment to provide assistance that arose within religious circles and led them to France, Greece, Ukraine, and Bosnia:

«We are married and, regarding your questions, you have your job, you have your house...from our perspective we thought there is so much injustice in Europe, and it is too much for us to do something, so we prayed about it, like *«God, what do you want us to do? »*. (Jan)

This section on the genesis of solidarity illustrates how individuals with diverse life experiences, motivations, and perspectives on migration came to engage in work in Sarajevo. Within this heterogeneous landscape, the plurality of support forms becomes evident – constituting the infrastructure of urban solidarity in Sarajevo – which, for years, has been fostering services and recreational activities both within and beyond the TRCs.

Viewed as an infrastructure, endogenous and exogenous forms of solidarity intertwine (see Giliberti, Potot, 2021) within a non-monolithic network, where varying sensibilities coexist and often collaborate. Moreover, the excerpts selected in this section show that the activation of civil society can be attributed to a wide range of factors: shared memories of war and displacement, long-standing volunteering cultures, curiosity-driven engagement among younger generations, and faith-based humanitarianism. Together, these elements form a complex ecosystem of solidarity that shape Sarajevo's position as a critical node along the Western Balkan route.

5. Local solidarity: activist citizens and solidarity spaces

In this section, I examine the mobilisation of Bosnian civil society – the endogenous actors of solidarity in Sarajevo (Giliberti, Potot, 2021) – who, despite economic constraints and limited staffing, have succeeded in establishing enduring and adaptive forms of “urban solidarity spaces” (Arampatzi, 2017). These are articulated through the development of both a take-off and a welcoming platform. While these platforms are also supported by the involvement of international NGOs, it is essential to focus on the local perspective, as it anchors the arrival of migrants and the responses of Bosnian civil society within the country’s historical context, interpreted through the lens of personal biographies.

The NGO of Danijela and Aiša focuses on supporting the stay of migrants in the city by distributing NFIs, which people collect directly from the organisation’s premises. The two main principles highlighted by Danijela reflect the core values of the NGO:

«We have based [the NGO] on the principles of solidarity and the principles of antifascism and antiracism, solidarity across the borders, all possible borders, not just the physical ones». (Danijela)

Through Danijela’s account, the importance of being a local organisation, composed of Bosnian citizens, clearly emerges. The peripherality discussed in Chapter Three in relation to colonial dynamics between the EU and the Western Balkans (Majstorović, Vučković, 2016; Rexhepi, 2018; Beznec et al., 2020) resurfaces here at a micro level, in the interactions with some of the solidarity actors coming from the Global North:

«We aimed to open a place to give this emergency response, to show that...it’s so important for us...that it’s local people...it was so important that is a local organisation that we show that we can, that is not just the foreigners arriving and showing us what to do and how to do, but that we ourselves can do something like that, that we should do something like that, knowing our own background: when it comes to the war and being a refugee, or when it comes to the current period...when everybody is migrating from this country.

I think it was somewhere deep inside, very important to show: *hey we are here we exist, we understand and we want to help*. I think that these were two point that were very important. For me...I am emotionally attached to [the association], I am one of the founders of [the association] and it's a plant you nourish to grow». (Danijela)

The “commonality of events” described by Danijela resonates both with migrants fleeing war – as was previously highlighted in relation to Bosnian citizens during the 1990s – and with those who embark on a journey in search of better living and working conditions, as in the case of post-conflict Bosnia. The World Bank report (2024, p. 6) provides a clear picture: “Today, about 1.7 million Bosnians are currently living in another country, implying that one in three Bosnians can be considered migrants. This emigration rate is the largest of any of all countries in Europe and Central Asia, and is second globally, only after the Republic of Syria”. In the Bosnian context, the refugee/economic migrant dichotomy thus dissolves, giving way to a reading of the country's contemporary history that brings together multiple reasons for displacement. This approach lays the groundwork for understanding and expressing solidarity both with Syrians and with youngsters from the Maghreb.

The space in which Danijela and Aiša work evolved from a DIY space (Cremaschi et al., 2020), created by locals, into an NGO. Despite the challenges involved in establishing yet another NGO in Bosnia – «NOT ANOTHER ORGANISATION (...) we struggled a lot with this idea» (Danijela) – this proved to be a tactic to safeguard the group's operations:

«We were thinking: *okay we are an informal group and we stay informal group*, but informal group cannot open a daily center or anything like that, we could only continue to work in the garage until it works. (...) So, we have at the end decided: *okay it is the only way, let's do it*, but to be honest we really thought it's going to be a very temporary thing». (Danijela)

From Danijela's account, it becomes clear that the decision to establish an NGO in Bosnia was a carefully considered one within her group. This attention to the form of support stems from a critical awareness of the broader context of social movements in post-socialist and post-conflict countries, which has led to the NGO-isation of civil society: "It was the result of the Western engineering project of building democracy and civil society through NGOs and professional civic activists" (Krasteva et al., 2019, p. 279). Their choice was guided by the desire to create a structured and physical base, a 'station' (Queirolo Palmas, Rahola, 2020), from which to operate in a transparent manner, particularly in relation to Bosnian authorities. Furthermore, within the *rest hub* that is the city of Sarajevo, the NGO of Danijela and Aiša functions as an "information hub" (Amigoni, Queirolo Palmas, 2023) – a space for the circulation of news, knowledge, and essential goods – a key feature of migrants' experience during their stay in the Bosnian capital. The following excerpt from the field diary provides an illustrative example of this circulation of information within these urban solidarity spaces:

Today, during the distribution activities, I pause to have a conversation with a young Afghan man. He tells me that he has been living outside Afghanistan for the past seventeen years and has resided in several different countries; we dwell in particular on his time in Romania and Greece. He explains that his main goal is to secure work and provide for his family, who are currently facing difficulties after their city was struck by an earthquake. He notes that the situation in Afghanistan has stabilised for the time being: there are no armed clashes or episodes of violence. Nevertheless, employment prospects remain extremely limited. His primary concern is to support his family; once their economic circumstances improve, he says, he will feel freer to focus on building his own life. He has always worked in construction and hopes to continue in this field once in Germany. In the meantime, he enquires about the possibility of finding work in Bosnia in the same sector, though an NGO staff member does not appear particularly optimistic, remarking that Bosnia offers few such opportunities. The young man has already attempted to cross the border with Croatia several times. On two of these occasions, he recounts with a note of bitter irony that «the Croatian police gave me a nice massage»,

thereby downplaying the violence he experienced. Another Afghan man travelling with him asks about the asylum procedure in the country. He reports having spoken to the IOM, who told him that a response should be expected within six months of submitting an application. I remain doubtful, as European Commission reports highlight that the actual waiting period for a decision is at least one year. From our conversation, it emerges that there is an interest in exploring whether Sarajevo might be a city in which to remain for a longer period, rather than merely a stopover on the journey towards Germany. Indeed, these kind of questions are more frequent than what I could imagine. (Excerpt from the field journal, 09/01/2024, Sarajevo)

In addition to this multidirectional circulation of information, which becomes a constant practice of solidarity work in Sarajevo, Aiša reflects on the daily realities of working within the organisation:

«that is something that come because you need that shirt, because people who should supply you with that shirt is not doing their job. Like we are the ones who are filling those gaps that others should do, that others are in charge for. It can be considered as humanitarian work, I'm not running from that: it is humanitarian work. But it's not our focus, we are really not there, or we were not there to feel better because we are giving you that shirt, is something that we have to do because no one else is doing that. Like I have to be there for you because no one from my surrounding, from my community is not taking care for you and I have to do it. But, the background of all that is political reasons and anger of those who are in charge who are paid to do some things and are not doing that. And that's why I cannot tell like we are humanitarian organisation, because humanitarians are doing that because they want to help them, I mean we also want to help them, but it's not about help it's more about solidarity». (Aiša)

Aiša situates the operations of the NGO within a broader political critique of national institutions. Similar perspectives can be observed in other parts of Europe, where citizens have mobilised to fill the gaps left by state institutions in ensuring access to basic rights and essential goods for migrants (Milan, 2019). Moreover, a sense of responsibility emerges – a perceived moral obligation to care for

others – within the framework outlined in the previous section, namely the idea of “giving something back to one’s community”. This is expressed through care for those she identifies as the most marginalised: the migrants transiting through the city. Aiša’s perspective aligns with the notion of “solidarity citizenship” (Krasteva et al., 2019), understood as a response to processes of b/ordering and othering (van Houtum, van Naerssen, 2002) that marginalise migrants. Such a response is situated within the framework of solidarity practices “oriented to the realisation of the common good, defying visions of human beings as mainly self-interested” (Della Porta, 2020, p. 938).

As seen in the previous paragraph, changing one’s position also entails a shift in focus. In this excerpt, Nejra highlights the motivations that led her to establish an NGO in Sarajevo and to engage in the sector of welcoming and inclusion for those who choose – or find themselves, due to circumstances – to remain in the city for a period of time. In doing so, she contributes to laying the first foundations for a culture of welcoming within the Bosnian third sector and institutions:

«And then, 2021 I decided to start a new project and I started to see what are my opportunities to open a center, an integration center. Why an integration center? Because all these years I was doing emergency response and then I saw that there is another need. Not only the people are in need of shoes or food, just like saving them for a moment. They were questioning me and asking me, *«hey is it a way that we find an apartment, we find a job? How I open a bank account? Can I get married? Can I learn the language?»* You know these questions I got a lot. And then I was thinking, yeah okay even if it was not a big number of people who wanted that, you know there was a group of people who was interested. So, most of them were in Sarajevo. Why there? [in Sarajevo] because it is a big city, it’s a capital of the country and also multicultural city, where probably they find themselves accepted. So, it was completely opposite to the north of the country, where they were really close and really against the migrants. Even migrants were sometimes in danger from the local population in this city. And in Sarajevo this was completely the opposite. And then I said okay, so the solution is to go to Sarajevo and open this center here, and that’s what I did. So in December

2021, officially I got the registration of the NGO and since then we are working here». (Nejra)

Her words bring us back to the relationship between border and capital, emphasising the capital's relatively welcoming atmosphere, even within public space. However, this excerpt invites us to take the analysis a step further. Nejra was guided by the needs she encountered in the field – needs that went beyond access to shoes and food, and instead pointed to the broader question of what it means to live in Bosnia. The demands concerned more complex needs and rights, such as the right to housing and education, access to employment, and so forth. These individuals were already in Sarajevo; they had chosen the capital as the place from which to claim these rights, turning to Nejra to understand how to do so.

In Nejra's case, it becomes clear that the decision to position herself in Sarajevo and to found an NGO was a direct response to the decision made by a group of migrants she was in contact with – individuals who had chosen to leave the border areas and settle, at least temporarily, in Sarajevo. It is worth noting the temporal context: the year 2021, when pushback practices became “normalised” as a mode of EU border management in the Balkan region⁶⁷, indefinitely prolonging migrants' journeys:

«the first thing that we did was to open this “resource center”. The center is a place where we try to offer different activities first of all, but also a community space, where people can come and can enjoy the time between each other, where they can do a lot of cultural and social activities. But at the same time, very essential services we offer. We are offering legal support, psychosocial support, psychological first aid and psychological support,

⁶⁷ Danish Refugee Council “12,000 pushbacks in 2021 reflects worrying normalization of illegal practice”. 16/12/2021. News <https://drc.ngo/resources/news/12-000-pushbacks-in-2021-reflects-worrying-normalization-of-illegal-practice/> and Danish Refugee Council “Pushbacks at european borders: A reality ignored despite growing challenges”. 13/12/2025. News <https://drc.ngo/resources/news/pushbacks-at-european-borders-a-reality-ignored-despite-growing-challenges/>. Further information available at: Protecting Rights at the Borders “Human dignity lost at the EU's borders”. December 2021. Report https://drc.ngo/media/o22gi4ft/prab-iii-report-july-to-november-2021_final.pdf.

education. These are all the things that we are offering, as we think that are really essential for living and for the future of refugees. And at the same time a community space where they can really feel safe, participating in these social activities which we find really important for the inclusion». (Nejra)

The NGO led by Nejra not only provides essential resources that address the shortcomings of state institutions but also facilitates access to the welfare system of Sarajevo Canton. As highlighted in the literature, the inability to access welfare benefits represents a major barrier to inclusion within the local context (Barberis, Boccagni, 2017). What sets Nejra's NGO apart is that it is registered as a non-profit organisation at the state level in Bosnia, and not only at the Entity level. During our conversation, she explained the reasoning behind this choice:

«I would say that was a smooth process, I waited seven months for the process because I went at the national level. I am the only NGO in Bosnia, especially the small one, that is registered at the national level. I wanted that, because also I am a person that sees this country as one country and one nation, because we have all these political problems. So, I do not want other part of Bosnia say: *We will not deal with migration*, maybe in the future I will have this opportunity to work with other parts of the entity, and different cantons where they didn't want to work with refugees you know. I think I don't have this capacity, but I wanted to send a sign and say: *Look integration is in the whole country and not only based on Sarajevo*». (Nejra)

Nejra's perspective, in which she views her country as "one country and one nation", constitutes a bottom-up opposition to the dominant rhetoric that frames Bosnia as a divided state with divergent interests and destinies. As previously discussed, since the dissolution of the SFRY and the beginning of the membership process, the EU institutions have posed the overcoming of ethnic tensions as one of the country's central challenges. Nejra's choice aligns with broader civil society practices of resistance to the dysfunctionality of Bosnia's post-conflict institutions. In 2014 – drawing connections to social movements in Spain and Greece (Majstorović, Vučković, 2016, p. 152) –

Bosnian civil society took to the streets in the major cities as part of the ‘plenum’ movement: “The call for jobs, food, and schools “in three languages” had earlier become one of the most ubiquitous signs of the plenums as workers, students, and citizens had sought to confront the ethnic fragmentation of Dayton Bosnia through economic and political demands” (Rexhepi, 2018, p. 936).

Moreover, Nejra’s intention to keep open the possibility of operating in cantons or entities that currently lack any reception system further reflects her long-term approach to working with migrants and asylum seekers. This perspective clearly frames the presence of migrants in Bosnia as something structural – an evolving reality that may, in time, require the transfer of the expertise developed through her work in Sarajevo to other locations. Since 2018, the only three cantons in which local and international forms of solidarity have emerged are Una-Sana, Sarajevo, and Tuzla. Regarding the situation in Republika Srpska, there have been no visible examples of solidarity, as the authorities – according to statements by Milorad Dodik, President of Republika Srpska – have chosen to remain on the margins of migration management, opposing the establishment of TRCs or other forms of reception.⁶⁸ This has resulted in a rapid transit from the border areas to the cantons of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

A second noteworthy aspect is the proposal put forward by civil society for the reception of people who decide to seek asylum or who find themselves – or choose – to live (temporarily) in Sarajevo. Through Nejra and her collaborators, civil society offers a *resource centre* that stands in contrast to the Temporary Reception Centres opened by the IOM with EU funding. Opposing a governmentality of temporariness that is segregationist and inhospitable – financed, as discussed in the previous chapter, through EU accession funds – is the effort of a number of Bosnian citizens who advocate for dignified permanence within a long-term vision. The work aimed at ensuring dignified reception

⁶⁸ Z. Trkanjec “Migrants have no place in Republika Srpska, says Dodik”. 13/01/2021. Euractiv https://www.euractiv.com/short_news/migrants-have-no-place-in-republika-srpska-says-dodik/.

develops along two main lines: on the one hand, access to housing outside the camp system; on the other, access to social rights. While the former is currently achievable, given the relatively low number of people choosing to remain in Sarajevo, the latter takes place through direct legal engagement between the NGO and the Bosnian institutions:

«for individual cases we really managed to change the point of view of some institutions, because in the end we forced them to work by the law. So, we sued, for example, we went on the court against the SFA. And we won! This is my way to do advocacy. (...) And I think this is much better and I think my result is much bigger because I change completely the way and I will probably legalise one person because of that. And I will help a whole family with children to have a legal father here». (Nejra)

Through their lawyer, the NGO strategically initiates legal actions aimed at changing the country's legislation or sanctioning illegitimate practices by parts of the state. Considering together the NGO's capacity to influence reception policies and its own proposal for dignified reception, it becomes clear that the organisation's effort is precisely to rescale a local reception practice to the national level. Linking back to the first chapter, this can be understood as a *scalar project* (Moore, 2008). Considering scales as a category of practice, Moore talks of *Scalar projects and practices* pointing the attention on "what people do with scale categories, how they utilise them to construct space and social relations for specific political aims" (ibid., p. 217). The author's suggestion is to shift the orientation toward the '*scalar dimension of practices*'. The major outcome is that actors use scale categories to 'constitute and organize' social life, since it shapes a politically powerful 'mental map'. Scale politics is thus always related to spatial projects, which: "attempts to crystallize certain sociospatial arrangements in consciousness and practice in order to further social, political or cultural aims" (ibid., p. 218). In summary, this case involves a project in which an alternative practice of welcoming and the legal struggle for access to fundamental rights are scaled up from the city level to the national level, producing the effect of influencing state legislation.

The context in which this confrontation with national institutions takes place is well documented in reports by the European Commission. Indeed, as for the asylum procedure, the European Commission (2020, p. 41) outlined that the agencies of the Ministry of Security in charge of handling migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, namely the Sector for Immigration and Readmission and the Service for Foreigners' Affairs "are significantly understaffed and partly underequipped". The extent of the lack of readiness to handle migration is outlined in the following pages of the report, where we learn that, another agency, the Sector for Asylum of the Ministry of Security, in 2020 had "only four employees working on the registration and assessment of asylum claims" (ibid., p. 43). Two years later, the Commission's 2022 report on Bosnia outlines that this office still has "very limited human resources and operational capacity, with only five staff registering and assessing asylum claims for the entire country" (EU Commission 2022, p. 47). Notwithstanding the small number of asylum applicants – 167 in 2021 – the EU Commission (2022) pointed out that from an average of over 450 days to reach a decision, in the first half of the 2022 there has been a reduction to 350 days.

This resistance on the part of the Bosnian authorities – manifested in the failure to allocate sufficient staff to the asylum sector – highlights not only that institutions are not monolithic, but also shows persistent structural tensions within the field of EU–Bosnia relations concerning migration management. At this level, the political aim of the scalar project initiated by Nejra becomes apparent: to expose the gap between legal frameworks and their non-implementation, thereby facilitating the contestation and overcoming of administrative borders (Gargiulo, 2017).

In conclusion, my interlocutors frame local solidarity as a response to the institutional abandonment experienced by migrants during their journeys through Bosnia. In our conversation, Aiša sets aside the term "help", choosing instead to situate her work within the realm of "solidarity". Likewise, direct action is rooted in various spheres: past volunteering and social engagement, a history of political activism, and a genuine curiosity towards the "other". The "other" who, in the course of daily work, becomes a *brother* or *sister* – encountered not through a charitable lens, but through a shared

commitment to stand in solidarity with migrants compelled to undertake long journeys and develop tactics to reclaim their right to freedom of movement.

6. The city center and the archipelago of camps

Commonality of events

As previously discussed, the dimension of solidarity in Sarajevo takes shape as an urban phenomenon, maintaining a complex relationship with the Temporary Reception Centres (TRCs). Before exploring the various perspectives on these centres and the motivations behind working either inside or outside them, a brief lexical clarification is necessary.

In the interviews, both my interlocutors and I frequently use the term “camp” to refer to the TRCs. This terminology is also adopted by the migrants I met during my volunteer work at Kompas. It was common to hear a group of migrants say “we’re staying in the camp”, or to show their “camp ID”⁶⁹, believing it was necessary to access the association’s services. Thus, the word “camp” has entered the everyday vocabulary in Sarajevo and also features in my interviews, extensive excerpts of which are discussed below. When referring to camps in Sarajevo, I mean the two TRCs opened within a coordination of Bosnian authorities and IOM, in 2018 and 2019. These are located in two municipalities on the outskirts of the capital: Ušivak, in the municipality of Hadžići, which hosts families, unaccompanied foreign minors, and vulnerable persons; and Blažuj, in the municipality of Ilidža, which accommodates single men. Their presence inevitably prompts my interlocutors to take a position, reflecting on and justifying their choices.

I would like to return to the notion of a “commonality of events” between locals and migrants. The history of the Bosnian war in the 1990s resurfaces during our discussions about the ‘camp’ as a form of reception, particularly in conversations with Nejra and Danijela. Connections between the current

⁶⁹ The *Camp ID* is a card issued by the TRC authorities that grants access to services within the facility.

situation of migrants and the participants' own experiences of displacement emerged spontaneously in these exchanges.

Nejra is keen to clarify – something that becomes even clearer in her later words – that she does not wish to be misunderstood in her opposition to TRCs as a reception model. She contextualises her viewpoint by relating it to her own past as a refugee in Switzerland:

«It is not perfect, but you know for me, especially personally, I went through this: I was living one and half years in camps in Switzerland as a refugee. So, I went through this as a child you know. And when you survive this, I can't see that differently especially when you are a 25-year-old man, you can handle to sleep one month in that bed. I survived one and a half years, so do not compare. When you go through this. When I was a refugee in Switzerland I stayed in the camp so long. I went through this, I saw this and also how system is functioning differently. And this is what I feel: why in Bosnia is not functioning? ». (Nejra)

Her experience as a refugee in Switzerland is marked by the memory of a place with available “resources” and where “we were getting some money to survive”. She draws a parallel between her own situation and that of today's migrants in transit through Sarajevo, although she does not consider the two directly comparable. Nejra leaves an open question: «why we can't provide that also to refugees here in Bosnia? There is a lot of space to provide services much better». This space, as we have seen, is being taken by local and international NGOs that have identified the gaps and are working to create spaces of solidarity and support.

Meanwhile, Danijela interjects her account of why her NGO's board decided not to work inside the TRCs – a point to which I return later – with an episode that occurred while she was living and working in Bihać:

«One time in one interview they asked me how do I see the camps. It was in Bihać, and I remember it was one night before the big raid of the police in Bihać, when they decided basically to clear the whole city and move everybody to Lipa. And it was in the middle of the night and people were walking, it's not an highway, but it's a main road (...). And they were walking two by two in the middle of the night and the line was kilometers long line, and in my mind, in that moment, when I saw... It was the picture of my father walking down the line like that, escorted by the police and the Croat soldiers at that time, going in the concentration camp. That was what was in my mind. This picture was in my head, like the same picture of 25 years ago when I was a child and seeing my father being taken two by two down the road and escorted by military and I don't know what...and we could go back on what are the refugee camps? What are the Temporary Centers? What is the concept and why they are created? The isolation that they create for the people, why they are extracted like that into some place? ». (Danijela)

In response to questions about the 'camp' form and its recurring presence in history, she adds a reflection on the funds channelled into the country to address the so-called "migrant crisis", expressing her disapproval of how have been used:

«What about the money that came? they could all live in fucking hotels if those money given for the migration was ever used (...) we thought all the services could function much much better and they never function, and we thought that if they did a good job we would never exist...that would never be a need of this kind of place, for this kind of organisation or any kind of services that [the NGO] is giving». (Danijela)

In this stance, the words of her colleague Aiša resonate, who in the earlier section on local solidarity politicised the driving force behind her solidarity work as the «anger of those who are in charge who are paid to do some things and are not doing that».

Choosing the position

In a territory hosting two TRCs, discussions often turned toward the reasons for working inside or outside the camps – motivations stemming both from personal convictions and organisational choices.

Jan, who has accumulated various volunteering experiences across Europe, most of which were in the humanitarian sector and refugee camps, explains his reasons for choosing to work within a camp by recalling his volunteer experience in Lesvos, Greece:

«I understand organisations saying: *we don't work in the camp, we don't want to be part of that inhuman space*. [Names of two NGOs] had that especially on Lesvos, when Moria burnt down, many of organisation said: *we will not be in the new camp*. We only said: *we want to be in the new camp*, because we can really make big difference for the people. The new camp is bad, really bad...like very bad or can be this bad (gesture something like a 'so-so'). Then we want to make camp bad instead of keeping it very bad. We can make a huge impact in the life of people in camp when we are in the camp». (Jan)

Jan and his team of volunteers began their activities inside Blažuj in May 2023. They immediately found themselves in a situation where daily arrivals were high⁷⁰, and both authorities and NGOs struggled to quickly process the initial intake screenings, resulting in long queues forming:

«But people are waiting in line. And when you are waiting for 3 hours you are done. You are tired of your travel, and you are done...and you want to go first. So, people skip the line, try to go first. And what we did for example we are standing next to the line to have conversation with people. Especially with people that you see making kind of troubles. Then I go there and start a conversation: *Hey where are you from? When did you arrive? How was your travel? Was it hard? Did you experience bad things?* and only to be there and look people in their eyes and making conversations – do that every day – and nothing happened in the line. Maybe we had 4-5 times that we need to go to

⁷⁰ According to figures published by the Bosnian Ministry of Security, the number of migrants registered by the Bosnian Service for Foreigners' Affairs in 2023 was 34,409 — the highest since 2018 (see Bosnia and Herzegovina Ministry of Security, 2024, pp. 69–70).

the police, because they start fighting and we couldn't stop it. And they said, IOM said: *This is crazy, before the police had to come in to stop fight and things, but now is so relax* people were long time in the sun, so we share waters few times during that moment to make it more easy. If you are not there is not happening. It is good for organisation to be outside, but also in this way [working inside the camp] we can really make very huge difference for the people as well in camp». (Jan)

Jan offers an example of the difference that working within the camp can make, by looking people in the eye and sharing with them a moment of waiting and frustration, such as queuing under the scorching sun for medical screening. Despite the support and expressions of solidarity that may emerge within the camp towards the migrants forced to live there, Jan's perspective becomes more nuanced when he discusses the importance of organising activities outside the camp. Drawing a parallel with the "closed" camp in Samos (Greece), where people told him they felt imprisoned, Jan notes that although migrants in Sarajevo's TRCs are free to come and go:

« (...) still for people physical it is not a prison, but mental it is a prison. It is every day the same. Small example: when I have my lunch in camp I start it not before 1 o'clock, why? They cannot start before 1 o'clock. If I'm hungry I can start at 12, but they cannot. They have to wait till 1 o'clock. They have to stay in line for everything. All the migrants have stories, they all experience things we will never experience in our life. As long as they are in camp they are in the same environment especially in their minds...it's all the time about their journey. When you bring them out of the camp they feel more humane. They feel...I don't know exactly how to say». (Jan)

Together with his group of volunteers, he organises weekly football matches on a pitch located in a central neighbourhood of Sarajevo. The importance of activities taking place outside the camp emerges from the feedback he receives, particularly from migrants who spend extended periods in the TRC: «Every time he says: *I live for the Fridays* – I said: *why?* – *Because we go for football on Friday*». As in other nodes along the Balkan route, in this playful space created by Jan and his

collaborators, “the *game* can become, if only for a brief moment, a game – only to return to being the *game* once again”⁷¹ (Franchi, 2025, p. 93).

As in Jan’s case, Mark’s work in Bosnia also began through contacts with the IOM and organisations operating within the TRCs, starting in August 2022. From his account, it becomes clear that the difficulty of coordinating with the authorities managing the camp led him and his wife – who is also his colleague – to observe the camp’s dynamics and carry out a needs assessment. Through the time spent within the TRCs and with other NGOs, they came into contact with migrants who shared their needs with them:

«it’s not the only thing that we wanted to do, but if there was a group of Cubans and they wanted a church so...you cannot offer that in the camps, because it’s religion, it’s divisive so you have to do it outside. But also, there’s a lot of migrants that we spoke to that desire to have some place to go off the camp, that they can go whenever they want. So, the programmes and [the staff and NGOs] ... all those people leave the camps at 4:30 in the afternoon...there’s nothing else happening on the camps. But our community center could open at noon and stay open until 8 or 9 at night and have a place where people could go to, again, fill in a separate need at a different time. All of those things put together is kind of the beginning of the idea of starting working off the camp». (Mark)

By listening to and observing the situation in the city, Mark and his NGO decided to position themselves outside the TRCs. While for some NGOs opening a space outside the TRCs represents a deliberate choice and an opportunity to offer activities without making too many compromises with the camp authorities, in the case of Amber, the NGO she works for «have applied to work in the camp on more than one occasion, but have been denied access by the SFA».

⁷¹ Translated into English by the author. Note the wordplay involving the first and third instances of “game”, which refer to the attempt to cross the border, while the second “game” refers to the act of playing.

A common feature among those who came to work in Bosnia from abroad and are employed by international NGOs – such as Jan, Mark, and Amber – is that they initially sought to establish themselves in Bosnia through work within the TRCs. By contrast, the NGO where Danijela and Aiša work chose to position itself outside the TRCs from the very beginning:

«the decision not to work in camps was a decision of [the NGO] board. We had a lot of discussion on this as well. But we had a unanimous decision at the time, it was 2020, that we will not go to the camps. And the main reason was that we really didn't want to justify with our presence how the camps were functioning». (Danijela)

«I think that the main thing here is that our position is that really no one can control us. They cannot tell us: *okay behave like that to them if you want this*. And people in the camp, I mean organisations in the camp, for sure need to think like that, to adjust themselves and their work to the work of main people at the camp. And I also think (...) it is also important for them [the migrants] to go outside of the camp and have something outside of the camp, like life is happening outside of the camp. Even we are so far from the camp, and this is not a really good thing, but on the other hand is good because they see the city, if they need some clothes also on their way they can see something that they want to see, like some places and go from the tram and checkout what is happening in the city». (Aiša)

From the words of the two colleagues, it emerges that their positioning is motivated, on the one hand, by a deliberate – and indeed political – intention to mark a clear distinction from the reception model they aim to propose, and on the other, by a desire for operational autonomy. From outside the camp, they are able to articulate a critique while also, in a creative and practical way, offering alternatives.

In concluding this section, it is worth noting that during my fieldwork, I was able to observe the collaborative relationships that underpin this small community of staff and volunteers from different NGOs, all committed to developing initiatives outside the camps. The camp space is described by Jan

– the interviewee with the most extensive experience inside the TRCs of the capital – as a highly regulated environment, where life is lived in queues and mealtimes are dictated by the organisations responsible for the various distributions that structure daily life within the camp.

Confronting the crisis: opposing the camp as a model of reception

I would like to conclude this paragraph with Nejra's words, as they highlight a significant contradiction within the reception model, shedding light on the structural crisis in which the institutional management of transit migration has been entangled since 2018. As previously discussed, the work of Nejra's NGO constitutes a practice of rescaling – from the bottom up – claims to access fundamental social rights. In summary, the process initiated by Nejra and her colleagues, in which they put their professional expertise at the service of upholding the rights of migrants in Bosnia, comes into conflict with the mode of governance adopted by the country to manage migrant transit – one that effectively strips the asylum procedure of the rights associated with it. Within this confrontation, their work remains situated within a Bosnian context, operating primarily at the national scale.

However, when addressing the issue of reception within the TRCs, Nejra shifts to a continental scale and identifies the institution which, in her view, is responsible for the precarious living conditions to which migrants are subjected in the Bosnian reception centres:

«Look sometimes on this topic people maybe understand me wrong, but I always try to explain things on that way...so camps in general, and especially run from these organisations who are running them and also for the money which is sent from the European Union, and the way how they want that these camps are functioning I am completely against them. But the problem is – will start with that and then I will explain my point of view – the thing is that when you have, for example, 10,000 people in a country, and you want to show solidarity, and you want to show that people are welcome, and you want to also save those people, you want to give them food, right, you want to

provide them with beds where they can sleep – what you will do with 10,000 people if the number of entering are thousand per day? How you will manage this, instead of reception centers? You know we call them camps, but they are reception centers. I do not really understand how people would do that. Is there any kind of way to manage? ». (Nejra)

As previously mentioned, Nejra experienced reception first-hand in a refugee centre in Switzerland and now poses a critical question: how can institutions respond effectively to an emergency? What is the most appropriate form of reception to address a significant increase in the arrival of migrants in a given country? However, as she continues to articulate her perspective, she situates the camp form within a broader and more complex reception system:

«So, these temporary centers, or let's say hubs, where they come, okay you are coming, but maximum 10 or 15 days. And then, spread them. Make this faster, make this a functional way where you will send these people, but the problem is the politics do not let them, the European Union do not give enough money and in the end the policy of the EU is not to give them good services, we know that. So, [the goal is] to push them away with very bad services, that's obvious. Why I try to take people outside the camp and why I do not support and do not go to work in the camp is exactly because I want to show my protest (...) I want to tell them: *I do not agree with what you are doing* but at the same time I understand that some people need to go somewhere when they just arrive in the country. I understand. When you have big numbers what you will do with that...where? ». (Nejra)

Nejra's protest takes shape through the creation of an alternative reception model, one that distinguishes between an initial emergency phase and a second phase in which individuals residing in the territory begin to claim access to social rights – and the host community must be prepared to guarantee those rights in a dignified manner. Whereas in the previous section the scale of contestation – through legal disputes – was national, the scale shifts to the continental level when considering the

topic of reception centres. Indeed, it was with EU funding that the TRCs were opened in the Sarajevo Canton.

Seen from Bosnia, the “crisis” in migration management blurs the boundaries of the Schengen Area. As Tazzioli and De Genova (2016, p. 10) show, naming a phenomenon a “crisis” triggers a process by which the very causes of the initial emergency are reproduced: “A state of “crisis” with regard to illegalised migration across the EU’s frontiers is therefore the norm rather than the exception, and the convulsive but plainly routine government of illegalised migration appears to both operate through “crisis” and yet to be in a permanent crisis itself”. The crisis is the framework of migration management in Bosnia since the arrival of migrants in late 2017. In 2018, Elida Vikic, writing on behalf of Human Rights Watch, drew attention to the “refugee crisis” characterising migrant transit through Bosnia, due to a state poorly equipped to respond:

“When you think of refugees in connection with Bosnia and Herzegovina, you may think of people displaced by fighting in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. But today the country is facing a different kind of refugee crisis as it strains to safeguard the rights of a growing number of people from other regions who are seeking protection. (...) Private citizens, many of whom experienced horrors during the Bosnian war and displacement, have been largely supportive and offered help to refugees and migrants. However these noble efforts are not a substitute for effective state action”.⁷²

In 2021, Josep Borrell, former High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, stressed that Bosnia was facing a crisis in migration management in the wake of the prolonged emergency brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Bosnia thus served as a pretext for broadening the focus to the EU as a whole, identifying the management of migrants and asylum seekers as one of the EU’s major challenges:

⁷² E. Vikic “Bosnia Failing to Protect Asylum Seekers”. 24/04/2018. Human Rights Watch <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/04/24/bosnia-failing-protect-asylum-seekers>.

“More broadly, the current crisis in BiH reminds us that the global challenges around migration and addressing migration towards Europe remain one of the most important responsibilities and at the same time, one of the most complex issues that we face. To address this challenge successfully, we need to strengthen our common migration and asylum policy. To achieve this goal, the European Commission has proposed last September a new Pact on Migration and Asylum, which is currently discussed by the EU member states”.⁷³

In 2024, nearly thirty years after the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement and seven years since migrants began transiting through the country, the European Commission underlined the ongoing difficulties Bosnia continues to face in ensuring dignified reception conditions – not only for its internally displaced citizens or returnees, but also for the migrants present on its territory.

“Bosnia and Herzegovina hosts around 90.000 refugees and internally displaced persons following the conflict in the 1990s, with 990 families (3 351 people) still living in one of the 45 collective centres across the country and in alternative accommodation. The authorities need to address their housing needs with sustainable solutions. To complete the process of return and fulfil its obligations to allow closure of Annex VII of the Dayton Peace Agreements, Bosnia and Herzegovina should ensure that returnees are able to enjoy their rights and should harmonise their access to services and resources. Bosnia and Herzegovina also needs to provide adequate humanitarian assistance and protection (including shelter, food and medical assistance) and effective access to the asylum procedure for asylum seekers and migrants” (European Commission, 2024, p. 44).

The European Commission’s report highlights that Bosnia is not fulfilling its responsibilities in managing the reception of migrants and asylum seekers. Since the onset of the “crisis”, the only

⁷³ European Union External Action “Bosnia and Herzegovina: the migration crisis is far from over”. 05/01/2021. Josep Borrell https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/bosnia-and-herzegovina-migration-crisis-far-over_en.

consistently active form of reception has been the TRCs, largely sustained through IPA funding.⁷⁴ Within this inhospitable infrastructure, the spatial segregation of these sites intersects with the violence that marks irregularised journeys towards Western Europe. In May 2025, two journalists from Balkan Insight reported on the increase in violence within the Blažuj TRC in the Bosnian capital, linking the situation to EU border control policies:

“As BIRN previously reported, BWK rose to prominence in 2023 and has controlled many of the migrant smuggling routes in Bosnia’s border areas for more than a year.

Over that time, the smugglers’ tactics have changed to adapt to a tightening of the EU’s external frontier. The smugglers have reportedly embraced more violence, adding theft, kidnapping and extortion to their activities and preying in particular on victims of border police pushbacks.

According to a BIRN source from the Bosnian state, this is the second shooting in less than a week in the refugee camp at Blažuj”.⁷⁵

I would like to conclude by returning to Nejra’s words and her decision to build an alternative to the TRC model. The efforts of her NGO align with one of the dichotomous models of reception discussed by Marchetti (2016): namely, *control through reception* versus *integrated and community-based reception*. Marchetti analyses the Italian model of migration governance from the late 1990s onwards. Applying this debate to contemporary Bosnia highlights the recurring patterns of migration governance across Europe.

In the *control through reception model*, encampment of migrants stands out as a key feature, within a system of governance “capable of combining humanitarian and security dimensions on a large scale” (Marchetti, 2016, p. 124). The political intent underpinning this model is to enforce long-term

⁷⁴ European Union Agency for Asylum “Roadmap for Cooperation between the EUAA and Bosnia and Herzegovina” (January 2025 – December 2027): Strengthening the asylum and reception systems in line with the Common European Asylum System and EU standards”. January 2025, p. 15

https://www.euaa.europa.eu/publications/roadmap-cooperation-between-euaa-and-bosnia-and-herzegovina-2025-2027?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

⁷⁵ A. Kurtic and T. Siviero “Shooting at Migrant Centre in Bosnian Capital Leaves Six Injured”. 27/05/2025. BIRN <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/05/27/shooting-at-migrant-centre-in-bosnian-capital-leaves-six-injured/>.

segregation of the hosted population – asylum seekers or refugees alike. In contrast, the *integrated and community-based reception* model “appears to take into account not only the dimension of reception itself, but also the potential of early intercultural contact in shaping the integration prospects of those who will eventually gain the right to remain permanently in the Italian territory” (ibid., p. 127). As demonstrated in this and previous sections, Nejra’s case clearly contributes significantly to the debate on reception. Although involving relatively small numbers, it represents a pioneering initiative within the Bosnian third sector: a housing-based reception initiative that demonstrates how life during the journey can be lived with dignity.

7. De-bordering through encounters

Aiša frames her work within a domestic and intimate dimension, that of opening the doors of her own home «somehow I am living in that place [the association], I consider that place like something mine». This space of sharing and social interaction emerges at the intersection of solidarity’s political dimension and more personal, relational aspects – such as the development of friendships and emotional bonds. These relationships are continuously reshaped: newly formed with recent arrivals, and stretched across distances as friends depart. Within this dynamic, time plays a vital role in fostering connection and intimacy. Over the years, as routes have constantly shifted, the temporality of migrants’ journeys has been significantly influenced by the securitarian and violent policies imposed primarily by Bosnia’s neighbouring and Western European countries. These measures have also shaped the everyday experiences of encounters in Sarajevo. Indeed, the situation within the NGO adapts in response to shifting policies along the migration route. This excerpt from Aiša serves as a reminder of the conditions as they stood in 2021:

«In the social area, which is my favorite place in the [ONG] because – actually I don’t know – the thing is before, when there were people who were more speaking English, it was better because they stay for a longer time there and, like, we can develop some conversation with them and it is very interesting, especially when we speak about some daily things and not only:

How did you coming from that country to Bosnia? And before, when I started, my first year, people were stuck here and we became friends. And they were there every day. It was so interesting just to chitchat with them, like just to sit and share some silly, stupid things, nothing special. And that is why I love that place». (Aiša)

These words fill the ‘now’ of waiting (Drangland, 2020, p. 77) with “sustained encounters” (Wilson, 2017) – everyday interactions that foster bonds and friendships. Rooted in curiosity and reciprocity, these moments hold the power to dissolve the us/them divide. Particularly during 2020 and 2021, when prolonged periods of waiting in Bosnia were common for many migrants, as well as for locals, activists, and volunteers, the route transformed into a space of unexpected connection, mutual discovery, and network-building.

The words of the research participants clearly highlight the importance of encounters, which, at different moments, may be sustained or fleeting (Wilson, 2017). Wilson (2017) frames the encounter “firmly within the remit of difference, rupture and surprise” (ibid., p. 452), adding that “What I want to underline here is that encounters do not simply take place at the border but are rather central to the making and unmaking of them” (ibid., p. 456). The encounter with migrants in Sarajevo underpins the infrastructure of solidarity, which, emerging from the grassroots, has given rise to a platform of take-off, materially supporting the (re)organisation of migrants’ journeys. In line with Wilson’s definition, as discussed earlier in this chapter, such encounters – despite Sarajevo’s physical distance from the border – take place “at the border”, which, though increasingly blurred for local residents due to their “commonality of events”, nonetheless persists. The act of encountering and the forging of bonds intertwines with a recurring theme in this discussion: the loss of a place of arrival (Pellegrino, 2024; Franchi, 2025), a notion already emphasised by Papadopoulos et al. (2015, p. 210) in relation to the nomadic subject: “You never arrive somewhere”. In this incessant movement – both enacted and endured – that characterises the condition of migrants across the European continent, the

sharing of moments with supportive individuals also transforms the social meaning and the functioning of the urban solidarity spaces. I noted this in my ethnographic diary during a day of volunteering in the week leading up to the beginning of Ramadan in 2024:

It is the final week before the beginning of Ramadan. Working hours are already being reduced, and preparations are underway to organise which items to distribute in response to the needs that will change during the month. For example, the distribution of food is given greater emphasis. The reflection begins with a question: «What do they usually need during Ramadan?» This question can be understood as an opening towards protagonism and co-construction, involving migrants in transit in defining the effectiveness of the support offered during this period.

More generally, as a working method, decisions regarding which materials to distribute are always reconsidered in light of what has most often been requested in the preceding days. That is always the starting point. The staff meet in a circular arrangement – as is customary in such situations – to plan the organisation of the month of Ramadan. (Excerpt from the field journal, 04/03/2024, Sarajevo)

Regarding the urban solidarity space (Arampatzi, 2017) founded by Danijela, she conceptualises it as a stratification of encounters and shared experiences, «an accumulation of many things» in which distribution emerges as a marginal element, despite being the most visibly performed practice by the staff:

«When look at the primarily part of everyday work is to share the resources that we are having or gathering in order to assist to someone. So, is it the resource to have a shower, laundry, or NFI shop...it's there, it's existent and we do this distribution which is one of the key aspects of the daily work. But at the same time, share...we share many things in this space, we share our own existence of being together with the people who have been here, our feelings, our empathy, our solidarity, our understanding. I think this is something that we are sharing. Sharing many different feelings. I observe this place as an accumulation of many things, you know. Our personal ones,

experiences, our personal lives, our encounters that we had, that have changed us as people. We share their stories, we share their lives, we share their hopes, we share their dreams, like we share...I think we share a lot in this way and this notion of caring and sharing and empathy and solidarity, I think this is the key point of our work. The distribution is just a physical point of doing. But, sharing, I believe, is much more than that. I think that sharing involves many different aspects of this work and that it's one of the primary emotions and feelings and things that happen in this space. And it's not just sharing between us and the users of the space, but also our sharing with different people who come here. Like we have different people who visit [the NGO], whether formal or informal groups from all over Europe, journalists, people who are involved in this or the other way into the whole story, the volunteers that come from different countries. I think there is a lot of sharing in this space regarding that». (Danijela)

Danijela's support work unfolds along the axes of care, sharing, empathy, and solidarity. Within this framework, the relational dimension of encounters becomes part of a broader practice of maintaining infrastructure from below, which confronts and resists the inhospitability of governmental infrastructures. This gives rise to a practice of *de-bordering through encounters*, which characterises the small but significant landscape of NGOs operating in Sarajevo. Analysing solidarity expressed towards migrants in transit, far from the geographical border, highlights the multi-scalar nature of de-bordering practices (Fauser, 2024).

These practices operate at the municipal and cantonal levels, challenging the centre/periphery dichotomy and the spatial segregation to which migrants are subjected within TRCs. By facilitating activities within urban spaces, internal mobility is enhanced, allowing migrants to establish social ties, engage with local solidarity networks, experience moments of sociability, and (re)organise their journeys. At the level of NGO practices, opening up spaces in the city also signifies an effort to break

the isolation imposed by TRCs located in remote areas or small villages. The importance of “keeping solidarity urban” becomes evident within this centre/periphery dichotomy.

At the national scale, these practices engage with the internal border regime by supporting the legal procedures of those seeking to reside in Bosnia. As exemplified by Nejra’s NGO, they facilitate access to the asylum process and the rights associated with it, thereby contributing to the dismantling of bureaucratic and administrative borders (Gargiulo, 2017). Furthermore, solidarity practices operate on a macro-regional scale, supporting the tactics employed by migrants attempting to enter the Schengen Area through the *game*. NGOs involved in the distribution of NFIs play a crucial role in this respect, where the formation of a platform of take-off becomes visible.

In this context, the actions of solidarity actors within the urban space of Sarajevo engage directly with the processes of internalisation and externalisation inherent to the EU border regime. The forging of alliances, the act of meeting, sharing, and creatively opening up spaces inhabited by diverse subjectivities form the backbone of solidarity practices in the Bosnian capital. Returning to the label given by Mark, the capital emerges as a *rest hub* along the Western Balkan route: a space of (re)organisation and take-off that materialises at the intersection of Bosnia’s complex state architecture and the work carried out by both national and international solidarity actors.

CHAPTER FIVE

ZAGREB AS A *STRATIFIED PLATFORM* OF MULTIPLE ARRIVALS

Introduction

This chapter shifts the analysis to the second field site: Zagreb (Croatia), within the Schengen Area. The discussion centres on questions of integration and inclusion of newly arrived migrants. The city has long stood at the crossroads of stories of refuge, transit, and return. The present is characterised, on the one hand, by the increasing prominence of returns through the Dublin procedure, and on the other, by the arrival of migrants entering the country on work visas.

As in the case of Sarajevo, the aim here is twofold: first, to highlight Zagreb's positioning along the Western Balkan Route and within broader policies of mobility control; and second, to examine the everyday challenges of ensuring rights for those who find themselves – often only temporarily – in the city. This discussion draws on the voices of NGO staff and activists such as Ivana, Mira, and Petra – whose experience spans volunteering, activism, and fieldwork – as well as Luka and Serena, whose perspectives add further nuance from different positionalities. The organisations I engaged with during fieldwork in Zagreb mainly focus on creating activities and spaces of encounter for migrants who remain, at least temporarily, in the Croatian capital. From the voices of the research participants emerges an image of a city in transformation, where questions of settlement and permanence increasingly shape the work of the third sector. The Zagreb research field was more “thinly” researched compared to Sarajevo. In particular, my participation within the NGOs was more limited due to the organisation of their work and the temporal constraints of the fieldwork. As a result, this chapter relies more heavily on interviews than on prolonged observation and fieldnotes. Consequently, the analysis largely reflects the perspectives of NGOs working with asylum seekers and migrants who intend to remain in Croatia, offering a more sedentary view of migrant experiences in Zagreb. Moreover, given the young age of the participants, the interviews did not explore direct

connections between the 1990s conflict and contemporary migration dynamics. In this regard, the chapter develops through a dialogue between the interviewees' voices, the scholarly literature, and institutional documentation.

Throughout the analysis, the dynamics in which the Croatian capital is embedded can be understood as a sedimentation of experiences of welcoming and integration, where the work carried out by actors expressing solidarity with migrants stands in contrast to the borderwork of institutions. Although this solidarity is not openly conflictual, it constitutes a rupture with institutional approaches that marginalise migrants and restrict their access to basic rights. What becomes evident is a shift: from engagement with migrants primarily characterised by transit, towards work with a more settled population, whose presence is shaped by the timeframes of asylum application procedures. Within this shift, the importance of working with the local community also emerges, particularly in efforts to deconstruct the boundary between “us” and “them”.

In conclusion, this chapter highlights both practices of resistance and the creation of alternatives to the scalar processes underpinning EU-level integration policies and the harmonisation of the socio-technical infrastructure that sustains the functioning of the Dublin Regulation. In everyday encounters and in the creation of spaces of solidarity, these practices of de-bordering open up concrete possibilities for meeting, interaction, and access to rights, challenging institutional logics of exclusion.

1. The city: retracing “integration” to the '90s wartime

During the '90s, the conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia led to the violent dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), resulting in what has been described as “the first large refugee movement since World War II within Europe” (Hess, Kasperek, 2022, p. 139).

“Since the beginning of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina in April 1992, more than 600,000 people (about 425,000 Muslims, 170,000 Croats and 5,000 persons of other ethnic affiliations) fled to Croatia. In 1992 and 1993, 500,000 people stayed in Croatia temporarily, on their way to third countries. About 30,000 Croats from Vojvodina (mostly from Srijem) and 5,000 Croats who fled from Kosovo, moved to Croatia (cf. Rebic 1995:17). According to UNHCR, 460,000 Serbs from Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina moved into Serbia (cf. Helton 1993:6). According to 1991 census, 581,663 Serbs lived in Croatia, 301,420 of them in former UNPA zones. Official Croatian sources estimate that about 215,000 Serbs left Croatia since 1991 (Government of the Republic of Croatia. Office for Displaced Persons and Refugees)” (Povrzanović, Jambrešć Kirin, 1996, pp. 3–4).

As outlined in Chapter One, two distinct processes unfolded simultaneously across Europe in the 1990s. On the one hand, Central and Western European countries were deepening their integration within the European Union – with the opening of the borders between them starting from 1st January 1993 (Geisen et al., 2007) – while on the other, the internal space of free trade and movement that had existed for over four decades within socialist Yugoslavia was collapsing. In other words, while some European states were dismantling barriers to free movement, a series of new nation-states emerged in the Balkans, resulting in the multiplication of borders across the region (Milivojevic, 2019; see also Stefanov, Radović, 2021; Jansen, 2023).

The brutality of the conflict and the vast displacement of people were addressed by scholars while these events were still unfolding, as they observed:

“Our insight is small, civilian, Zagrebian, “underground”. At the same time it is stretched by means of media, ripened through a sad inversion which has this time brought narrators to their ethnologists, and thickened by the responsibility of the metropolis, a difficult role which the capital, together with its civilians, has had to take as the crossroads of all the controversies of this war” (Čale Feldman et al., 1993, p. 4).

As literature on Zagreb's urban development suggests, many people moved to the capital during the war, contributing to the rise of informal urbanisation (Zlataar, 2014, p. 150). A particularly illustrative case, collected by Prica and Povrzanović (1996, p. 98), documents the internal displacement of people towards the capital:

“When the Serbian army came for the three of us it was Sunday. That was the day the Serbs took it, November 18, 1991. They brought us to Velepomet [warehouse] all the Serbs were there. We saw how they killed people, shot them, tortured them. I don't even like to remember that. We were at Velepomet for one day and then the buses came for us. We were all pushing and hardly managed to get in. And then they took us to Mitrovica. They gave us something to eat there. We slept there and they said that we were going to Zagreb. We travelled 7 days from Vukovar to Zagreb. When we were on our way to Zagreb people were very kind and stopped the bus every 5 minutes to give us food. We arrived in Zagreb, at the Hotel Esplanade and they gave us a room. Then they moved us from the Hotel Esplanade to the Hotel International. I found a lot of tents here. (...) It's very hard for me that I left my home. I can't get used to the Zagreb way of speaking here. It is nice here in Zagreb, but my greatest wish is to return to Vukovar and that we all live happily”.

In this context of displacement and violence, Stubbs (1996, p. 32) identified the concept of “integration” as central, but emphasised its complexity for scholars and practitioners promoting democratic values in Croatia. Three interrelated factors shaped the challenges: the legacy of war and territorial aggression, the consequences of forced mass migration, and the broader post-communist transition dynamics. The author argued that these processes were underpinned by the emergence of ethnic nationalism, which tended to dismantle established notions of community and give rise to new formations that may be fundamentally resistant to integration-oriented political projects. Moreover, the concept of “integration” risked to be implemented as a top-down discourse – i.e. as “humanitarian aid” or “psychosocial projects”. Thus, the author proposed a tentative definition:

“Integration refers to the attempt to facilitate a sharing of resources – economic and social, an equalising of rights – political and territorial, and the development of cultural exchanges and new cultural forms, between forced migrants and all other members of a society. At the local level, the process of integration involves all sections of the community in minimising social distance, and facilitating communication and co-operation, through creative negotiations which produce new social meanings” (ibid., 1996, p. 36).

As noted, this concept will be revisited in the final section of the Chapter, observing how – thirty years later and within a different migratory phenomenon – the efforts of civil society to facilitate access to rights and resources for foreigners temporarily present in Croatia are being re-articulated.

As discussed in Chapter One, Balibar (2009) – reflecting on the European space and its role in the “generalization of the institution of the ‘border’” – suggests that every border has a “double meaning, local and global: it is a ‘line’ (more or less accepted, stable, permeable, visible, thick or thin) separating territories which, by virtue of its drawing, become ‘foreign’; and it is a ‘partition’ or ‘distribution’ of the world space, which reflects the regime of meaning and power under which the world is represented as a ‘unity’ of different ‘parts’” (Balibar, 2009, p. 201).

This borderline, drawn in opposition to the “other”, was simultaneously emerging in both Southeastern and Central/Western European countries during the same period. Already in the early 1990s, Povrzanović and Jambrešć Kirin (1996, p. 10) highlighted that “refugees are considered as a political, financial, and social burden by Western governments”. The processes of b/ordering and othering (Van Houtum, Van Naerssen, 2002) have shaped the development of the EU border and migration management. Three decades after the wars in Yugoslavia – and following the accession of two former socialist Yugoslav republics, Slovenia and Croatia – this trajectory culminates in the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, signaling a significant erosion of the guarantees traditionally associated with the right to asylum.

Whereas the displacement of Yugoslav populations in the 1990s often involved individuals who shared a common language and history with the receiving communities, recent migration flows have introduced a visible presence of individuals from the Global South, many of whom transit through the Western Balkans on their journeys to Central and Western Europe. Others, entering with work visas, temporarily settle in Croatia to address the country's labour shortages. From the Declaration of Independence in 1991 until the entrance into the Schengen Area in 2023, the country "has lost large parts of its population and labour force. Croatia's population declined from 4.7 million in 1991 to 3.8 million in 2021, which may largely be explained by prevailing migration trends in this period" (Valenta et al., 2024, p. 510).

Two key concepts emerge from the 1990s analyses: "integration" and "crossroads". The former is examined in depth by Stubbs (1996), who defines it as a relational process rather than a fixed outcome. The latter, proposed by Čale Feldman and colleagues (1993), points to a city deeply affected by the tensions that accompanied the dissolution of the SFRY and the years of war.

These dynamics – social work on integration and Zagreb as a crossroads – resurfaced during the long summer of migration in 2015, when the formalised corridor (Beznec et al., 2016) enabled approximately one million people to cross Croatia, reaching Central and Northern European countries. Zagreb thus emerged as a strategic crossroads both before and after the establishment of this formal corridor, with the integration debate revived in light of the challenges posed by the governance of "secondary movements" under the Dublin Regulation.

This section concludes with the words of Petra, the only interviewee who explicitly linked engagement within Croatian civil society to the war of the 1990s. Her reflections display a clear awareness of having lived through a period of profound transformation in Croatia, and of now being

in a position to offer younger generations a lens through which to interpret and, perhaps, change their world:

«But I think we are all responsible to do this impact and I think that we need to especially focus on young people, because they are the future and especially my generation – I was born in 1990. I'm part of a generation who passed through the war, who passed to the period that we didn't have a phone, and then we had a phone and we had mobile phones and then smartphones and all of this technology things. So, we passed through a lot of periods in this society...and we also didn't have a lot of things and opportunities that, for example, young people have today. I would say just stupid thing now: Erasmus. When I was studying no Erasmus. We didn't have chance to open our minds and things, but in the same time we ended up very good. But we are carrying this generational trauma, I would say that we understand much better what is happening now, then this young people, because they are born in different time. I think the responsibility of my generation is to create a space for young people to change this world. Because I'm not doing this job forever, I'm already tired (laughs). I would be very happy if somebody continue this. In a different way maybe, with different types of ideas, because the context is changing, everything is changing and we need to follow what is happening». (Petra)

2. The genesis of the solidarity work

Experiences during the initial phase of the Western Balkan route

Driven by a curiosity to understand the life trajectories that led these young Croatians (four out of five of the interviewees) to work in the field of migration and to support asylum seekers and refugees, a number of shared biographical trajectories emerged. I begin with the story of Luka:

«I was studying political science in Zagreb and on my second year I started volunteering with an NGO. I started volunteering directly working with asylum seekers and asylum grantees. Mostly working with them teaching Croatian, some cultural classes and staff like that...so for about a year and half I was doing two days a week volunteering. Actually, by working with them, especially with one individual from Senegal, he actually informed me that he

was starting to play football for a local club. I enjoy sport, but I don't like football in Balkan because of all politics that are right-wing and violent. So, I completely ignored football when I was like 15 or 16. He informed me that there was a club where he was playing and... Also, three days before the first game of the club, it was not connected to the club but there was a public small protest here, near the Europe square. It was 2016... So, the so-called Balkan route was already a bit in action, let's say. There was a protest regarding open the borders and stuff like that. I was in the protest and some of the people in the club were there and they were also handing out flyers, presentations, so I kind of clicked it together. In the span of one week I heard about them from two different sources. I went for the game and I loved it and I've been part of it for the last ten years». (Luka)

The team was established in 2014 and has accompanied all phases of migration through Croatia: from the formal humanitarian corridor to the criminalisation of migrant journeys, up to the present day, marked by the arrival in the capital of a significant number of workers from the Global South. It was founded by a group of organised football supporters from one of Zagreb's teams who, following tensions with the club's management, decided that:

«They wanted to make their own club, where things would be different. So, it was actually started by a group of fans. Alongside of that there were also different kind of individuals, some from NGOs, some from random topics activists, anarchists, union people...it was a mix of different people». (Luka)

In those early years, several members of the football team were either employed by or volunteered with NGOs working with migrants and asylum seekers. At the collective centre "Hotel Porin", various actors from Croatian civil society were permitted to enter and carry out activities:

«A big issue for us, that is still present, is that we are not allowed to go to Porin into reception center, we are not allowed to direct communicate with the asylum seekers in the reception center... because in the beginning that was the way we would like go, because a lot of the people from the club were also volunteering [in different NGOs]. And through them we would like to

make flyers in different languages Arabic, Turkish, Farsi and, like, share them around the reception center so people would know. And for the last four or five years many NGOs would deny access to the reception center and most of them actually only have access to the kids who are in the school. If they are working directly with schools and stuff like that or with people who have had asylum granted to them. So, it really kind of narrow down our availability or our option to talk directly with people». (Luka)

A similar experience is recounted by Petra. This initial phase of the migration route marks the period in which Petra had her first experience of volunteering with children from migrant families who were, while awaiting onward movement, being hosted in the Zagreb collective centre:

«I came to a camp here in Zagreb. It was a classroom full of children. Big chaos. For me was the first time working with children. This are very specific children. I came inside, maybe 40 children screaming, running...not speaking language...it was maybe three of us of volunteering. Usually this entering inside of the camp was a kind of experience. But I say: *let's go, let's do it*. I wanted to do something good. I was following the situation since 2015 and donating and everything. (...) I started to do that twice a week. Sometimes three times a week. It depends really, it was not so structured and organised. It was the start of this sector of working with children and everything. So, we were not professionals. We were just normal people». (Petra)

The excerpts from Luka and Petra offer a glimpse into a time when support for migrants in the capital was carried out in a spontaneous manner, involving the participation of individuals mobilised through word of mouth at universities or in workplaces – an activation of “ordinary people”. Furthermore, it appears that, during this period, institutions were also more permissive regarding access to the camp where asylum seekers were accommodated. The discussion will later address how the Zagreb reception centre – Hotel Porin – has since become largely inaccessible to most NGOs operating in the city. Petra recalls those years with fondness, highlighting the value of encounters with people from various parts of the world:

«That time it was one of the most beautiful time in my volunteer life, because at that time in the camp we could go inside people's rooms, hang out with them every time we did our shift, some families invited us for tea and dinner...it was not just working with children, but also being part of a family, because people really cherished what we did and in some way we were like taking over this educational job that they couldn't do, because of the situation». (Petra)

Through her involvement with these families, Petra came to discover the dimension of the *game* – the desire to continue the journey – and, consequently, the rupture of social bonds brought about by the departure from the Croatian capital of the families with whom she had spent time at the camp:

«Many people were just coming and going. We didn't have a lot of families who decided to stay. It was just a stop. But at that time, I didn't understand anything: *what is the game? How people come? How people go?* because children tell you some things, but you cannot connect the whole story and I will not sit with people with a tea and ask: *how do you get here?* I was very innocent, I didn't understand the whole situation. And then, slowly, you start to understand that these people will not stay here forever. That these people have passed through a lot of things. And then, you start to think about the broader picture of the whole volunteering part. And one of the first very difficult moment I had...because you get very connected with these children. I was watching these children as my children; these families were like my families». (Petra)

As documented in the literature on practices of support for migrants in transit and asylum seekers during the so-called migration “crisis” (see Fontanari, Ambrosini, 2018; Ataç et al., 2021; Della Porta, Steinhilper, 2021; Amigoni, Queirolo Palmas, 2023), in Croatia too – and particularly in its capital – civil society gave rise to public forms of contestation against the state-led governance of mobility. Indeed, the passage of the migration route through Zagreb and its visibility prompted expressions of solidarity from Croatian society, such as the “Welcome! Initiative/Inicijativa Dobrodošli!”,

established by the Centre for Peace Studies in response to the arrival of numerous migrants at the city's bus and train stations (Bužinkić, 2017, p. 148).

In addition to these mobilisations, examples of “grief activism” (e-ERIM, Hameršak, 2022) also emerged in the urban space, particularly acts of counter-memorialisation following the death of Madina Hussiny. This action “was aimed at determining who is responsible for Madina's death and for all those who were persecuted and died at the borders and in the name of borders” (ibid.; see also Banich, 2020). Marijana Hameršak retraces the final moments of Madina's life:

“Madina went on the game on November 21, 2017, with her mother and five siblings. An hour after they clandestinely crossed the border between Serbia and Croatia in the afternoon, they were intercepted by the police. Madina's mother, as she stated in the complaint she was sent to the ombudswoman through Doctors Without Borders, asked the Croatian police for asylum for herself and her underage children. However, they told her that they had to return to Serbia. They told them to come to Croatia again next month. The mother then started begging the policemen to let them at least spend the night in Croatia, because the children were exhausted, but they ignored her pleas. After some time, a police vehicle arrived and transported them to the border, to a place next to the railway line near Tovarnik, which at the time was already known as the place where the Croatian police bring people they pushed back to Serbia. The policemen then ordered them to go back to Serbia, to Šid by following the railway line. Shortly thereafter, the train that knocked Madina down came. The ambulance doctors who arrived at the railway station in Tovarnik, where the police brought Madina after the accident, could only declare Madina's death at twenty-one hours and ten minutes. Madina's body was kept in Croatia, while the family was deported to Serbia the same night. The body was subsequently sent to Serbia and handed over to the family. Madina was buried in Šid, where she still rests to this day”.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Full analysis available here: M. Hameršak “Madina Hussiny”. 06/04/2022. e-ERIM <https://e-erim.ief.hr/pojam/p-madina-hussiny-p?locale=en>.

Petra, during our interview, also emphasised the significance of Madina's story for the Croatian community of volunteers and activists. She described it as a "turning point" – a moment when attention sharply shifted to the violence associated with pushbacks carried out by Croatian authorities at the border.⁷⁷

Activation after the closure of the formalised corridor

The experiences developed during the early years of the migration route gradually consolidated, leading to the creation of local NGOs that ensured continuity in the support work for asylum seekers and refugees. What emerge is a civil society that mobilised from the outset of the route in solidarity with migrant in transit, setting up spaces for advocacy and diverse forms of support. One such organisation is the local NGO where both Ivana and Mira began their engagement as volunteers:

«I start working in our programme (...) where we provide individual mentor support to refugees...to children who have international protection here in Zagreb. That's how I started...I volunteered for four and half years. I was very involved in the topic, (...) I was interested in the broader topic of migration. I was in contact with our previous coordinator. I did some cultural mediations, assistance with obtaining rights, and then when our coordinator of integration activities [name of the person] went on maternity leave I came here as a replacement for here. I'm here till the end of June. From my volunteering position I actually start working in [the NGO] at the beginning of this year».

(Ivana)

«I decided that since I have never work with refugees and asylum seeker I decided to first apply to free shop. And then I came to free shop in 2021. (...) So, I was there for a while and then when I started working full-time I switched to [another NGO programme], where I started volunteering

⁷⁷ The international press also reported the incident: L. Tondo "Croatia violated rights of Afghan girl who was killed by train, court rules" 18/11/2021
<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/nov/19/croatia-violated-rights-of-afghan-girl-who-was-killed-by-train-court-rules>.

with...children from Syrian family who needed like language and education support. I was with them for a while and then you...kind of...spontaneously start working on assistance in obtaining rights, because that's also the idea of the whole programme, That you have people inside the families who are there on a weekly basis and who are able to...the beneficiaries ask them often: *I have this issue with obtaining this right or that right...* So if you are interested in the whole situation, you very soon start to engaging: *okay now we're searching for a doctor, now this is the right they have, the right they don't have.* Which we also get through the education in the beginning or at least you know where to check to people have some right and you can of course always call the volunteer coordinator of that programme». (Mira)

From Ivana and Mira's accounts, one of the central themes of this section already begins to emerge: the effort made by Croatian civil society to support asylum seekers and refugees in accessing their rights. Petra first encountered the notion of the *game* during her first volunteering experience with migrant families hosted in the city's reception camp. Conversely, a few years later, Ivana and Mira became aware of the institutional borders faced by asylum seekers through sustained encounters (Wilson, 2017) with the families of unaccompanied minors whom they were helping with their schoolwork. These daily interactions exposed them to the persistent denial of fundamental rights suffered by asylum seekers. This shift in the focus of everyday work highlights how the route passing through Zagreb has changed over time, turning the city into a place of stay – albeit a temporary one – for an increasing number of migrants.

Serena became interested in migration during an experience in Serbia, also along the Western Balkan route, where she came into contact with grassroots associations and worked with unaccompanied foreign minors. That experience influenced her later studies, leading her to pursue a career in this field in Zagreb:

«Why am I here? I ended up here through an Erasmus traineeship that I was doing during my master studies. I have studied social work with youth and I

always had an interest in migration and in working especially with asylum seekers and refugees. Because after the bachelor, the first practical experience I did was a volunteering of two months in Serbia with children on the move. It was an accommodation center, a small-scale accommodation center for unaccompanied minors. And after these two months volunteering and working with social workers, pedagogues and the whole team psychologist also lawyers, I fell in love. I said, I want to do this, this is it, this is my field. So, from being a confused student, finishing a bachelor in international relations and languages, I chose the path. And after that I collected some, again, internship experience in the same field, always in migration». (Serena)

In conclusion, the dynamic that emerges is one of mobilisation occurring concurrently with the unfolding of the Balkan route. Indeed, as will be demonstrated in the following pages, solidarity and support activities have spanned the entire past decade of the route's crossing through the Croatian capital, evolving within this "polymorphic space" (Jessop et al., 2008) in response to migrants' tactics and the constraints imposed by a hostile and criminalising regulatory environment.

3. The borderlands and the capital

A point of connection between NGO workers in Zagreb and Sarajevo can be identified in their previous experience at the Croatian–Bosnian border – specifically on the Bosnian side. Petra became interested in the situation at the border from 2018 onwards. Together with a friend, who volunteered at the camp and with whom she attended a training course organised by a local NGO, she decided to visit the Bosnian side of the border in order to observe and better understand the situation:

«At that time a lot of people started to go to Bosnia. It was 2018. It was everywhere on the news. Velika Kladuša is two hours from Zagreb. It's not so far *May be somehow we just go and see*. But it took a long time organise ourselves and see what we can do. But at the same time one of our friend, who is also working for some Christian organisation, he asked me if I wanted to go with him in Velika Kladuša and Bihać, just to check what is happening... I said: *Okay why not, I'm already planning to do it, but if I can*

do it now why not. And we took some donations. I didn't know what to expect, because I was never being involved in this kind of work. I was just more based in Zagreb, but I started to understand some things. From me it was *I'm sitting here in Zagreb, Bosnia is in our neighbourhood, I cannot sit here...now I'm already very deep inside and I can just stop now or I can continue*, so I decided to continue. We went there and this was actually the first time that I understood people who I met 2016–2017 when I was volunteering in the camp. Some things started to be very clear, like why they behave like they behave in some situation. Why they don't talk about it and things like this and why we don't know anything about it». (Petra)

The Bosnian borderlands become a critical site for understanding the unfolding of the governance of migration and its violence. Following Petra's account, the discussion reconnects with the central theme explored in Chapter Four: namely, forms of solidarity towards migrants in Bosnia:

«At that time in Velika Kladuša it was like a big open camp in the football field. People were leaving in tents. And most of the help they got was from the local community. So, 2018 it was like the “great year” in Bosnia, in Velika Kladuša especially...because local people, of course because they have the experience of being refugees and for me Bosnian people are very...I mean, if I talk about solidarity, I talk about Bosnian people for sure. Not all of them of course, but a big part of people is very...yes, they have this solidarity to other. It doesn't matter which situation». (Petra)

These discrete, everyday actions carried out by the local people, within host communities, are embedded in the histories of individuals who themselves experienced displacement during the conflict. The “commonality of events”, previously discussed through the stories of Nejra and Danijela, resurfaces in Petra's reflections:

«We were coming and going all the time there and it was Corona time and all of the volunteers from [international NGO] and in general the international volunteers need to go from Kladuša and then it was a big shit, because it was not much support like people had before. There was nobody present there.

Local people started be hostile, because the camp opened. Many people started to come...many organisations, many volunteers. It was a mix of everything. (...) maybe what it is important to say: sometimes I don't blame local people for behaving like this because Bosnia was put in the situation where nobody was prepared, nobody told them: *Yes, now a lot of people will be here* especially these small cities in Bosnia like Kladuša, like Bihać. Okay Sarajevo is bigger city but still...these small places where very affected by this – border places...and when you see that nobody is handling the situation, they are opening a camp...so it will become permanent. Poor people they give what they had and, then, because of the lack of support and the whole system was not working...of course brothers and sisters were hungry and they would steal, but they would steal from the poor people, but then all the situation started to escalate where local people were just very hostile: *We don't want these people here* – and that's it. It was very difficult also to work with local people at that time. And, also, there were no volunteers there». (Petra)

After several years of volunteering in the Bosnian borderlands, Petra began to notice a shift in the attitude of the civil society. The withdrawal of institutional support extended not only to migrants – facilitating the establishment of inhospitable and spatially segregated reception centres – but also to the local population, fuelling resentment and hostility. This dynamic echoes what was noted in Chapter Four, when discussing scholarly literature investigating the situation within Una–Sana Canton (Hromadžić, 2020; Helms, 2023), and it also emerged in the conversation with Nejra.

The role of the border as a site of visibility and as a materialisation of the violence inherent in European migration policies resurfaces in the interview with Mira. In 2023, she decided to spend several months volunteering in Bosnia, at the Croatian border, in order to better understand the broader context within which the work with asylum seekers in Zagreb takes place:

«I went to Bosnia (...) with [name of an NGO] (...) for two and a half months because...I felt like there is a part that I would like to see maybe to better understand the context since those are the people with we work here in

Zagreb...that was a weird time, it was beginning of 2023 it was a weird time for Velika Kladuša and that part of the border. There were no people. It was winter, but it was pretty weird that that is so little people there. Because that year the route changed and it went towards Slavonia and over like Slavonski Brod and those other parts. And at that time Rijeka had a lot of people and before Bosnia I went to few times to volunteer on the humanitarian point in Rijeka...And I call them: *Do they need people?* and then I was there for a month». (Mira)

The act of moving along key nodes of the route in order to grasp its broader dynamics is not only central to the solidarity actors, who took part in this research, but also reflects the multi-sited ethnographic methodology employed in this study. This approach – moving along the route, between Sarajevo and Zagreb – allowed me to analyse how different actors make sense of and support migrants across contexts. It also shaped my own positionality as a researcher navigating the fragmented geographies of migration and solidarity, granting access to overlapping yet distinct networks of NGOs, volunteers, and migrants, while revealing how both solidarity and migration governance are configured in diverse way across space.

As discussed in Chapter Three, the Balkan route, understood as a “plane of struggle” (Tsianos et al., 2009; Tsianos, Karakayali, 2010), emerges from the tensions between the top-down construction of the migratory route as an object of policy and space of governance, and the bottom-up production of mobility through migrants’ own tactics. This space, constructed from below – formed through encounters, contacts, and word-of-mouth – is inhabited and traversed daily by a multitude of diverse subjectivities. It disrupts the top-down production of categories, discourses, and funding streams that aim to impose frameworks of control and channel migrants’ mobility.

Working at one of the crossroads of the route (Queirolo Palmas, Rahola, 2020) therefore presents challenges shaped by the localisation, at the city scale, of dynamics previously analysed on a

continental scale through EU policy documents. The priorities of European institutions in the governance of migration and reception are made manifest in the “everyday spaces of the city” (Darling, 2017, p. 184). However, along the route cities are not mere repositories of top-down policies; they are sites of tension – “local battlegrounds” (Dimitriadis et al., 2021) – where competing visions of the city shape the urban fabric. Through this extended excerpt from Serena, some of the key issues that will be explored in the sections that follow can already be identified:

«It’s always a question, yes, you work with people who are temporarily here, the question is how long will they be here? Okay, so they’re here and they apply for asylum, it’s like the first step towards, like, I don’t know how to call it...staying temporarily in a country – if you apply for asylum. In Serbia, the kids were just on the move, they were not applying for asylum, they were just staying there, even for months longer. With no asylum application going on, you know, very free to leave anytime, basically. So, it was always a question: *Will this person be here tomorrow when I go to work? Okay, we’ll they come back?* Sometimes they were going and then coming back after a few weeks, and then trying to go again to the border and then coming back. And you cannot really do any activity which is consistent and you know, it cannot work individually with the person, I’m a social worker, so I’m talking from this perspective (...). Here, those who approach us, the majority, is willing to stay, like, they would not, I think they would not approach us if they have the intention of living tomorrow or in few weeks (...). So those that come to us are willing to stay until the asylum procedure is over, negative or positive, but until it’s over. Which means even a couple of years, it’s a long period of time, you can really work, you can really work with them (...) If they start the language course, they will most probably stay until the end, they want to find a job, so it’s a different situation. We also have cases of those who come and then live after some months, because they’re tired of waiting, and they didn’t see any future here, they hear that others from the same country got negative, so they think that will they also get negative: *better to live, try my luck in another country*. And then again, they come back after some months or even one year, and it starts all over again for them, and for us also, who are working with them. Yes, so I mean, it’s different, it’s different». (Serena)

Serena's reflections highlight the multiple temporalities embedded in the migration route. A form of circular mobility to and from the border – experienced in Serbia – is gradually replaced by a type of mobility marked by prolonged waiting, particularly during the asylum process. As Serena notes, the wait for an asylum decision can extend up to two years. During this period, the city of Zagreb becomes a space of living: a place in which people work, build relationships, and envision a future. In this aspect, the Croatian capital begins to function as a platform of arrival (Meeus et al., 2019) both for newcomers as well as for 'Dubliners' (Kasperek, 2016).

The everyday labour of navigating this extended waiting period – whether for the outcome of an asylum claim or the potential departure following a rejection – shapes the everyday experiences of the NGO staff members I engaged with. As this chapter discusses, this (temporary) urban population includes asylum seekers, individuals under temporary protection, and labour migrants with working visas. By shifting the focus of the analysis towards the capital city, this section also brings to light the multiple bordering processes that traverse Croatian society itself.

4. Travellers, Dubliners and Platform Workers

Travellers in Zagreb: crossing the digital border

This section explores how Zagreb has become a site characterised by layered and multiple forms of mobility, shaped by the tension between migrants' movements and the European Union's legal infrastructures related to the Dublin Regulation. Building on Tazzioli's (2020) notion of "governed mobility through mobility" and Metcalfe's (2022) concept of the "biometric border", this section argues that Zagreb functions as a critical urban node in the EU's spatial governance of migration. Moreover, drawing on excerpts from Mira and Serena, as well as institutional reports, I argue that these overlapping dynamics not only shape migrants' trajectories but also contribute to the

transformation of Zagreb's urban fabric – from a largely invisible transit hub to a more complex and contested platform of arrival, return, and (temporary) settlement.

Despite the willingness to stay expressed in Serena's excerpt – and later echoed by other interlocutors – Zagreb still retains a strong connotation as a transit city. This persists even though the third sector is actively working to develop a platform of arrival (Meeus et al., 2019) capable of responding to the diverse needs of asylum seekers, refugees, and migrant workers. Migrants' journeys along the Western Balkan route alternate between moments of visibility and invisibility. Below are three excerpts that describe how the city experienced an increase in the visibility of transit during the period characterised by the so-called 'seven-day paper' policy:

““Seven days paper” is the colloquial term for documents regulating transit through Croatia in 2022 and 2023. During this period, which does not yet have a specific name but could be called the shadow corridor period in analogy with the Balkan corridor, more than a hundred thousand refugees and other migrants passed through Croatia using various documents. The oldest of these documents, the return decision, was in effect for seven days, and thus activists, humanitarian workers, refugees, and other migrants often generically referred to them collectively as “seven days paper”” (e-ERIM, Hameršak, 2023).⁷⁸

«It's definitely different than it was in the end of 2022 and beginning of 2023. When, with the seven days paper, the mobility was visible, like, fully visible. Bigger amounts of people on the bus station, on the main train station. Seeing people in buses, in tramways, but not people who, okay, you might be foreigner, people who you can see are going *game* or came from *game*. Or are like, you could often see people getting picked up. Maybe if they came from reception center to the bus station to leave and then the police would find them and bring them back to the reception center. For a while, it was extremely visible that much that Zagreb needed to open camp. Not a camp, but a humanitarian point with food. That was

⁷⁸ M. Hameršak “Seven Days Paper”. 15/12/2023. e-ERIM
<https://e-erim.ief.hr/pojam/p-seven-days-paper-p.pdf?locale=en>.

not for sleep over. It was just food and showers, but no clothes and towels. So, you know, it didn't make that much sense, but okay, food. And then it stopped being so visible. It's much less visible now. (...) So, regarding that, it looked much more as border city at that time than now. Also, maybe this part more, because people are instructed from the border to get to the reception center. So, this is still maybe for them at some point still a border until they managed to enter the reception center. But then also the reception, it's a lot of, it's very much a transit city. Last year, out of the 68,000 requests intents, 34,000 people slept in the reception center last year». (Mira)

The “humanitarian point” Mira refers to is situated within the broader migratory dynamics shaping the Croatian capital, as described in the ethnographic account provided by Romana Pozniak:

“As a place for short stays and a boarding station for trains heading towards Rijeka and areas near the Slovenian border, the space around the Zagreb railway station became a frequent transit and stopping point for people on the move. With a simultaneous increase in the number of “foreign workers,” tourists, and residents of the reception center for people who apply for international protection, Porin, who also frequently passed through the station or spent time in its immediate vicinity, the main railway station in the summer of 2022 gave the impression of a completely new urban center. It spatialized the harsh dichotomy between the image of a cosmopolitan, intercultural European Union and its policy of systematic illegalization and precarization of people from the Global South attempting to migrate to Europe by various routes” (e-ERIM, Pozniak, 2023).⁷⁹

Following the chronological sequence of events outlined by Marijana Hameršak, the ‘seven-day paper’ – which was, in fact, a return decision – was replaced in March 2023 by a ‘registration certificate’. This change took place within the broader framework of aligning Croatian systems with the standards of the Schengen Area. Unlike the return decision, the registration certificate involved the collection of fingerprints and legalised transit through the country for no longer than 24 hours.

⁷⁹ R. Pozniak “Paromlin”. 18/12/2023. e-ERIM <https://e-erim.ief.hr/pojam/p-paromlin-p.pdf?locale=en>.

While the ‘seven-day paper’ had an immediate impact on mobility in terms of speed and visibility, as described by Mira, the implementation of the registration certificate has had more enduring consequences. The fingerprinting process and the subsequent entry of this biometric data into the Schengen Information System (SIS) form the basis for activating the Dublin procedure once a person formally submits an asylum request in another EU member state.

It may be argued that the *shadow corridor* continues to traverse Zagreb, reproducing itself in relation to the consolidation of the biometric border (Metcalf, 2022). This border regime shapes the European Union’s control of so-called “secondary movements”, thereby generating the conditions for a growing number of “refugees in orbit” (Moreno-Lax, 2012), a phenomenon that will be examined in the following section. During the period of the formal corridor, Hameršak and Pleše (2017, p. 34) observed that: “In practice, those who had applied for asylum after leaving the camp and arriving in the reception centres in Zagreb or Kutina mostly continued their journey sooner or later, secretly crossed the border, confirming Croatia’s status as a poor and transit country, with a dysfunctional asylum system, and with no developed social nor other networks that could make their lives easier in the new environment”. Drawing on Sardelić (2017, p. 15), during those months the label “transit country” ceased to be assigned by the EU to the states involved in migrants’ movements and instead became a category that these states adopted to define themselves. This self-labelling functioned as a way of signalling that they did not intend to assume responsibility for the people entering their territory.

Nearly a decade later, what has changed? Following Mira’s analysis, the answer appears to be: very little. Both the city of Zagreb and Croatia more broadly continue to function primarily as spaces of transit. However, the policies implemented by the Croatian government in the process of joining the Schengen Area have led to the harmonisation of digital infrastructures with those of other EU member states. This has produced a new form of forced mobility – one marked by return to Croatia – driven by the operationalisation of biometric registration and its integration into EU-wide databases such as

the SIS and Eurodac. The trend is one of a steady increase in the number of people seeking international protection in the country; here are the figures provided by DG Home:

“In terms of international protection, there has been a notable increase in the number of asylum seekers between 2020, which saw 1 932 applications, and 2022, when 12 872 persons applied for protection. The most common countries of origin, according to national data, include Iraq, the Russian Federation, Burundi, Turkey, Afghanistan and Cuba. A few Syrian beneficiaries of international protection families (a total of 250 people) were also resettled in Croatia from Turkey from 2017 to 2019, and are still residing in Croatia”.⁸⁰

This dynamic also emerges from the words of those interviewed. The impact that the rising number of returns has on people’s lives and on Zagreb’s reception system is described by Mira:

«So, the numbers are bigger than the accommodations in Zagreb and in Kutina, Even for the first six months almost. (...) I would say that...I think a lot of people straight go to another country. Otherwise we would have a breakdown of the system if we had 900 people from last year and 780 people from this year. If they stayed here, that’s a complete break of the system. So, they left mostly. But how it’s affected? It’s affected because there’s I think more people that are staying and thinking more seriously about staying. Since you’ve been already deported once, you are kind of: *Okay, let’s see. Can I make a life here?* Unlike maybe the first time they left just went to Croatia. Or maybe there were people who already spent one more time here. Decided there is no way that they’re going to get to positive and left and then go to... But I also hear about the quick deportations, but there are deportations of longer times. Where people have spent like long time in the other country and then they are deported. So, the city... I mean...It’s not new [the Dublin deportations], but it’s for Croatia. It’s not new as in existence, but it’s new in this much being used and it will be used more. And there will be like last year, 897 whole year. (...) it’s growing. This is from Schengen, from the start of Schengen. And now especially with the situation in Germany etc.». (Mira)

⁸⁰ Figures from: European Commission “Migrant integration in Croatia”. 01/04/2025. Migration and Home Affairs https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/migrant-integration/migrant-integration-hub/eu-countries-updates-and-facts/migrant-integration-croatia_en.

As discussed in Chapter Three, Croatia has allocated a significant portion of its EU funding from the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) for the 2021–2027 multiannual financial framework to the area of reception infrastructure. However, civil society actors in Croatia have consistently emphasised that everyday living conditions in reception centres have not improved accordingly (see AYS, 2023; CLC, 2023, 2025⁸¹).

Mira's excerpt allows us to return to these systemic shortcomings and to consider how, based on her experience, deportations shape individual decisions around settlement and onward movement. In many cases, these returns prompt individuals to reconsider Croatia not merely as a transit zone but as a possible place to stay – sometimes for months, other times for years – while navigating uncertainty and weighing the possibility of building a life in the Croatian capital. In other words, within EU member states, temporal regimes of control are accompanied by spatial ones. As Tazzioli (2020) argues, mobility is not only obstructed and decelerated but also actively directed. This steering is orchestrated through the Dublin Regulation and the legal–technological infrastructure that supports its implementation.

One of the emerging consequences of these policies is the transformation of the urban landscape.

Serena reflects on her impression of the city upon her arrival:

«When I came in 2021, there were not so many foreigners around Zagreb. It's getting more and more multicultural, when I arrived here...Really, no. It seemed like the country was close to foreigners. Only tourists, yes. Some of Erasmus students, of course, asylum seekers not so many as now, but not many foreign workers, as now». (Serena)

⁸¹ CLC "Condition in Reception Facilities". Croatia. Country Report. Aida and Ecre. Last updated 19/08/2025. <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/croatia/reception-conditions/housing/conditions-reception-facilities/>.

The Croatian capital increasingly appears as a crossroads of multiple mobilities – those of transit, arrival, and return. To the temporary presence of migrants during their journeys, whose visibility momentarily reshapes public space, are added those returned under the Dublin Regulation, as well as foreign workers from the Global South entering the country on legal employment permits. The 2025 World Bank report situates the Croatian government's labour-migration policies within a broader interpretation of the country's demographic challenges:

“An increasing number of foreign-born individuals have been arriving in Croatia in recent years in response to the existing demographic challenges. More recent immigration trends show that foreign workers have increasingly become a source of labor used to fill shortages. The number of new work permits for foreign citizens has rapidly increased from less than 10,000 per year until 2016 to close to 80,000 in 2023. Between 2019 and 2023, more than 250,000 first-time work permits were approved. In the first six months of 2024, 21,000 more new permits to foreign workers were issued than in the same period of the previous year. On an EU-wide scale, Croatia has the largest share of immigrants arriving for work purposes (more than 90 percent), while in the majority of other countries these work-motivated flows represent less than half of the permits granted to foreigners – with a much larger role played by family reunification, education and for other reasons” (World Bank, 2025, p. 30).

Thus, Zagreb emerges as an urban space where the datafied biometric border (Metcalf, 2022) and mobility governance (Tazzioli, 2020) intertwine, producing a dual mechanism: one that renders migrants hyper-visible to bureaucratic systems while leaving their urban presence precarious and temporary.

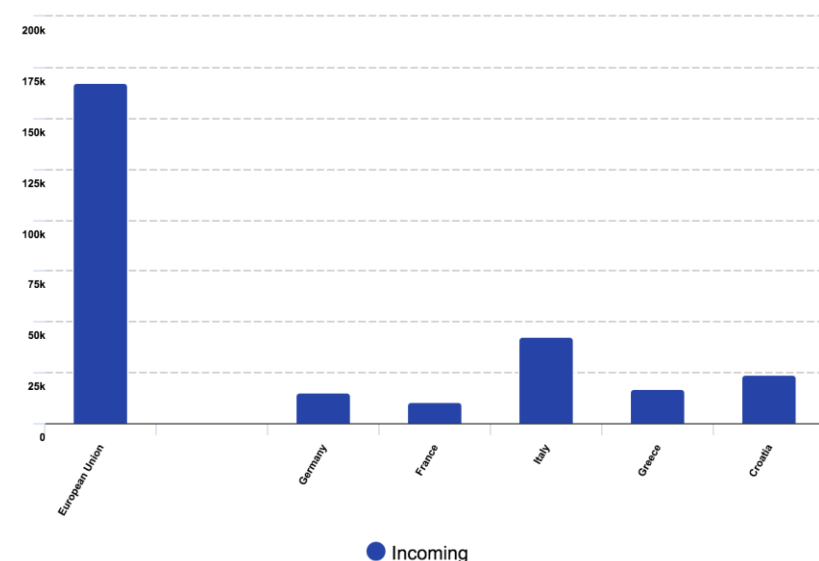
Dubliners: administrative waiting

Since 2023 the Croatia accession to the Schengen Area has introduced significant changes not only within Croatian society but also along the broader Balkan migration route. In Sarajevo, waiting often represents a phase of (re)constructing future mobility; in Zagreb, by contrast, waiting is shaped by

administrative timelines and bureaucratic delays. The temporality of stay in the Croatian capital is largely defined by the asylum procedure – one that can extend up to two years and is marked by one of the lowest recognition rates in Europe. The hypermobility produced by the Dublin Regulation contributes to the emergence of what Moreno-Lax (2012) term a population of “refugees in orbit”. This regime of mobility is underpinned by Eurodac, a sociotechnical infrastructure of surveillance (Kuster, Tsianos, 2022), which interacts with the proliferation of borders both inside and outside the Schengen space. The digital infrastructure shaping Dublin exerts concrete effects on migrants’ lived experiences – inscribing itself onto their spatial and temporal trajectories, enforcing movement, and synchronising periods of stay in the return country with the procedural pace of local asylum authorities. Drawing on data provided by Eurostat for the year 2024, “the largest number of incoming requests was recorded by Italy (42,807), followed by Croatia (23,721), Greece (17,163), and Germany (14,977)”⁸². Figure 5.1 illustrates the distribution of Dublin transfer requests received by the countries most directly affected by the phenomenon.

⁸² Full data available at the Eurostat website: Eurostat “Statistics on countries responsible for asylum applications (Dublin Regulation)”. June 2025. Statistics Explained
[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics_on_countries_responsible_for_asylum_applications_\(Dublin_Regulation\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics_on_countries_responsible_for_asylum_applications_(Dublin_Regulation)).

Number of requests, 2024



Ranked on outgoing requests.
Source: Eurostat - [migr_dubri](#), [migr_dubro](#)

eurostat 

Figure 5.1 Source: Eurostat “Statistics on countries responsible for asylum applications (Dublin Regulation)”. Data available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics_on_countries_responsible_for_asylum_applications_\(Dublin_Regulation\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics_on_countries_responsible_for_asylum_applications_(Dublin_Regulation))

There are two types of Dublin requests: take charge and take back. A take charge request is made when the requesting country believes another EU member state should assume responsibility for examining an individual’s asylum claim. In contrast, a take back request applies when the asylum seeker has already lodged a claim in the requested country, and the current country asks for their return. In the Croatian case, 95.7% of Dublin requests were take back, compared to only 4.3% take charge. This disproportion reflects the dynamics discussed in the previous paragraph. As Hameršak noted, the administrative tools introduced to legalise migrants’ transit through Croatia have had harmful retrospective consequences – limiting individuals’ ability to determine where they might stabilise their lives in the long term.

Figure 5.2 illustrates the transfers actually completed in the year 2024, with Croatia ranking third, following Germany and France.

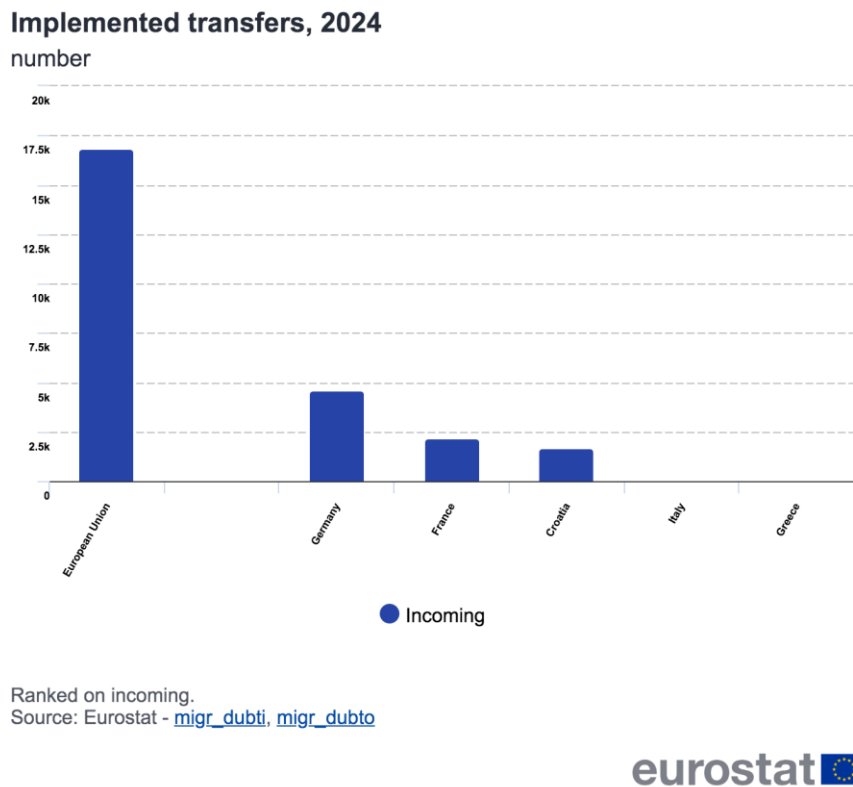


Figure 5.2 “Statistics on countries responsible for asylum applications (Dublin Regulation)”. Data available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics_on_countries_responsible_for_asylum_applications_\(Dublin_Regulation\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics_on_countries_responsible_for_asylum_applications_(Dublin_Regulation))

The impact of these transfers on individuals subjected to deportation is examined by the NGO Médecins du Monde Belgique and documented in the AYS report, which focuses on the situation in Croatia:

“Médecins du Monde Belgique published a report in 2019, examining the mental health of asylum seekers, especially ones who were sent back to Croatia because of Dublin III regulation. The study states that: “57.83% of participants scored above the cut-off result on the anxiety scale; 67.47% of

participants scored above the cut-off result on the scale of depression; while 65.06% of the participants scored above the cut-off result on the scale of overall psychological distress. Similarly, 50.61% of participants scored above the cut-off result on the scale of post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms. Asylum seekers transferred to the Republic of Croatia under the Dublin III Regulation on average demonstrate more pronounced depressive symptoms and lower subjectively assessed quality of life; as well as lower levels of satisfaction with their own sense of future security.” (Médecins du Monde Belgique quoted in AYS, 2023).⁸³

The AYS (2023) report on Dublin returnees shed lights on the administrative borders (Gargiulo, 2017) that returnees face once back in Croatia:

“During recent years we provided assistance to a great number of Dublin returnees. While for asylum seekers Dublin returnees’ biggest challenge is the psychological shock after being back to poor camp conditions and starting a case all over again, returnees with granted status face even bigger struggles. If their residence permit is lost or expired, they need to get new documents in order to obtain any rights: social welfare, healthcare, education, bank account, job contract, etc. Issuing the documents can be a long process, during which people are in limbo. Without documents, they can neither work nor get social welfare money. Without a job, it’s impossible to find accommodation, which is one of the conditions for issuing new documents. For returned asylees, the state doesn’t ensure any kind of emergency assistance. In 2022 we assisted financially 24 Dublin returnees through our “housing fund”, ensuring one month’s rent for those in need” (AYS, 2023, p. 6).

From the perspective of someone who has undergone a Dublin transfer, I find myself listening to the story of a young asylum seeker during a city walk guided by him. I note several key elements in my diary:

⁸³ Here the full report: Médecins du Monde Belgique – Office for Croatia “Nearing a point of no return? Mental health of asylum seekers in Croatia”. February 2019
https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/resources_mental_health_of_asylum_seekers_in_croatia.pdf.

I take part in a walk organised by a local initiative, led by a young asylum seeker. We meet at 2 p.m. at the bus station behind the railway station. The group gradually forms as the walk begins. The tour is conducted in Croatian. The young man speaks Croatian well and is studying to obtain his secondary school diploma. He is the only member of his family to have been transferred from Germany back to Croatia. He leads us out of the station tunnel and into the park in front. Pointing to one of the many benches, he tells us that in the first days after his return he would spend time there reading a book given to him by his teacher in Germany. At that point, he knew no one. Shortly after his return, he decided to begin volunteering with a local NGO, although he spoke neither Croatian nor English. During the walk a friend kindly translates from Croatian into English for me and adds further details about his story. Because of the health problems faced by his family members, they were allowed to remain in Germany. He, however, was deported back to Croatia upon turning eighteen. The walk continues, and we stop at another park near the city's main square. It was there, he explains, that shortly after the transfer he realised Zagreb would henceforth be his city and that he would need to organise his life accordingly. From a side street, he leads us into the central square, where he has parked his bicycle. He talks about his bicycle, how useful it has been for him, and we conclude the tour at the city tunnel, located a short distance from the square. (Excerpt from the field journal, autumn 2024, Zagreb)

Croatia mirrors Italy in relation to the Mediterranean route; that is, it functions as a transit country, yet one that carries out identification procedures. The implementation of a fingerprinting policy positions both countries – located at the external borders of the Schengen Area – in the role of (re)shaping the trajectories of so-called ‘refugees in orbit’ (Moreno-Lax, 2012). As discussed in Chapter Three, this process of collecting biometric data from migrants in transit began during Croatia’s accession to the EU. Since migrants’ journeys often cross territories outside the Schengen Area, their highly precarious and convoluted journeys have been shaped by institutional efforts to harmonise national policies and technologies with the demands of the European Union. This effort

towards an infrastructural harmonisation creates what can be framed as continuum of violence, temporal injustice and stolen time (Fontanari, 2017; Khosravi, 2018) along the Balkan route – which crosses states at different levels of EU integration. The pace of migrants’ mobility within the Schengen zone – in institutional documents referred to as “secondary movements” – is influenced by both accommodation infrastructures and everyday borderwork (Rumford, 2006), consisting of micro-practices aimed at slowing down and delaying the collection of the resources and information essential for continuing their journey. In EU member states, policies of temporal control are accompanied by those of spatial control. Thus, migrants’ mobility is not only obstructed and slowed down, but also actively directed (Tazzioli, 2020). This steering is carried out by the Dublin Regulation and the digital and legal infrastructure that ensures its operativity.

Platform workers and access to services

In addition to the events which took place around the train station in the summer of 2022, the visibility of the migratory phenomenon in the public spaces of Zagreb is shaped by the substantial presence of workers from the Global South. As Brighenti (2007, p. 325) points out, “Visibility is a metaphor of knowledge, but it is not simply an image: it is a real social process in itself,” further arguing that “it is a socio-spatial relation that reconfigures the territorial boundaries of power, recognition, representation, and resistance” (Brighenti, 2010, cited in Mogiani, 2024, p. 186).

As highlighted in the World Bank report (2025) cited in the previous paragraph, Croatia issued 80,000 work permits in 2023. During fieldwork in Zagreb, I recorded this visibility in my field diary:

It is Sunday. During the day, I take a walk in Ribnjak Park. I bring my audio recorder and capture the music played loudly by a group of young men and women, attempting to drown out the noise of traffic. The songs are of Asian origin, and they are dancing – both in pairs and in groups. They draw patterns in the air with their interlacing hands. A couple approaches the group, joins them for a dance, and, as they leave, express their thanks by

placing their palms together at chest height. The park is lively, the day is hot and humid. Several delivery riders, also of Asian origin, pass by; some pause briefly on a bench in the shade before continuing their route.

(Excerpt from the field journal, 01/09/2024, Zagreb)

Regarding employment opportunities, during an informal conversation, a staff member from a local NGO noted that the presence of migrant workers has opened pathways for asylum seekers and refugees to access the labour market:

Regarding employment, it appears that the entry of foreign workers through regular migration channels (around 80,000 individuals) has also facilitated access to the labour market for asylum seekers. The waiting time for the latter to begin working has decreased significantly – from nine months to three. Just yesterday, a French-speaking woman came to the NGO and mentioned that she had found work at KFC. The member of the staff tells me that asylum seekers “work like Croatians” – by which she means they are employed under the same conditions and with the same rights as local workers. In contrast, she explains, the situation is different for those who arrive via labour migration schemes. These workers tend to be more exploited and often live in poorer conditions. However, the member of the staff adds that there is still no structure in place capable of addressing their demands for improved working conditions. (Excerpt from the field journal, 24/06/2024, Zagreb)

The presence of migrant workers is increasingly being recorded within NGOs. Services set up to support asylum seekers and refugees are now increasingly accessed by migrant workers:

«Majority are still asylum seekers because of the circumstances. We have some who already got positive decision, living here also for years. Or they just got it, they can still access as long as...They are here, of course, and migrant workers. They're a small percentage of our beneficiaries, but it's growing and growing. Because more and more people are coming and we're trying to get in touch with associations. There is, for example, the Association of Nepalese. There is a big group of people from Philippines also, so we try to get into their Facebook groups. For example, the spread of the voice a bit

about us and we're getting more and more. Their issues are basically the language also, accessing language courses. Because the language courses that you have to pay are not affordable for them. And they're here. Their salaries are not the best compared to the average. So, they have like minimal salaries. They're sending money back to their countries, their family. What's the rest is for them to live here. They don't really have money to invest in a language course. So that's why they reach us and also legal questions. Working contracts, working conditions, switching from one job to another. Application for residents permits, and so on and so forth». (Serena)

These workers, who are unable to access Croatian language courses for foreigners due to their low income and the need to send remittances home, rely on NGO services initially implemented for asylum seekers. The challenges posed by labour migration from distant countries are highlighted in the World Bank report:

“However, foreign workers in Croatia face important challenges to integrate in the labor market, particularly related to occupational downgrading, due to language barriers, skills mismatches, and imperfect recognition of foreign credentials. (...) The higher prevalence of occupational downgrading among migrants is due to different factors such as the imperfect recognition of foreign credentials and the limited proficiency in Croatian among many migrants, particularly those who do not come from Western Balkan countries. Croatian language proficiency is not a prerequisite for acquiring a work and residence permit but has important implications for the productivity and safety of foreign workers. (...) This challenge has rapidly become more widespread in the last years with the arrival of more immigrants from farther places that do not have the same knowledge of Croatian as older waves of migration from neighboring Western Balkan countries. Skills mismatches and lack of recognition of foreign qualifications are other main challenges for the integration of immigrants in Croatia (European Commission, 2019)”. (World Bank, 2025, p. 37)

From the interview with Petra, “Coordination for integration”, a network of Croatian civil society organisations working on migrants’ access to rights, also plays as it is composed of:

«all the organisations in Zagreb, but also outside of Zagreb, who are working with asylum seekers, people under international protection or foreign workers». (Petra)

The recent influx of individuals from the Global South entering Croatia for employment purposes does not represent an entirely new phenomenon. As the experience of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) demonstrates, the country was embedded within a network of non-aligned and developing nations that actively facilitated the circulation of workers, students, and researchers within the decolonising Global South (see Spaskovska, 2018; Henig, Razsa, 2023). However, the dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia in the 1990s led to a different migratory dynamic, with countries such as Croatia receiving large numbers of refugees from neighbouring states – individuals who shared a common language and recent history, and who were readily integrated into the national labour force.

5. The platform of arrival: a history of stratified integration practices

Thirty years of “integration”

This section critically examines the concept of integration as it has evolved over the last thirty years in Europe. Drawing on EU documents, interviews with Serena and Petra, and critical scholarship on integration and inclusion, the section demonstrates how, in practice, what should be a two-way process has become a matter of individual responsibility for the newcomer.

Barbulescu (2015, p. 26) argues that: “Integration is this policy the locus where ‘us’ and ‘other’ are defined black over white in official state policy”. Meanwhile, Dodevska (2024) notes that it was during the 1990s that the governance of mobility and integration-related challenges began to gain prominence on the EU agenda. The author outlines that: “The EU has historically promoted ‘civic integration’ measures, such as the provision of integration courses, through its funding mechanisms,

principally through the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). The creation of the ‘Justice and Home Affairs’ pillar in the Maastricht Treaty (1992) paved the way for this” (ibid., p. 752). Thus, the Tampere Summit in October 1999, in addition to the security-oriented framework in which cooperation with neighbouring countries was included, proposed that: “A more vigorous integration policy should aim at granting them rights and obligations comparable to those of EU citizens”⁸⁴ (see Chapter Three; Augustova et al., 2023; Hess, Kasperek, 2022).

The prominence of integration policies within EU institutions and member states began in the 1990s, in parallel with the violent dissolution of the SFRY. As repeatedly in this dissertation, the conflicts in Yugoslavia “created the first large refugee movement since World War II within Europe” (Hess, Kasperek, 2022, p. 139), redefining the concepts of “refugee” and “citizen” in the affected countries.

Over more than twenty years of debate, Dodevska (2024) traces the EU institutions’ growing leadership in shaping integration policies. Croatia, a member of the EU since 2013, accesses the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), the latest version of which (2021–2027) includes eight financing instruments, among them the AMIF fund, whose spending priorities for Croatia were analysed in Chapter Three. Regulation 2021/1147 establishing the AMIF fund includes a statement on the importance of promoting integration pathways:

“Considering the migration flows to the Union and the importance of ensuring integration and inclusion for persons coming to Europe for local communities and for the long-term well-being of our societies and the stability of our economies, it is crucial to support Member States’ policies for the integration of legally-staying third-country nationals, including in the priority areas identified in the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027. The Fund should support integration measures that are tailored to the needs of third-country nationals, as well as horizontal measures aimed at building

⁸⁴ European Parliament “Tampere Council 15 and 16 October 1999”. Presidency Conclusions https://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/tam_en.htm.

Member States' capacity to develop integration strategies, to strengthen exchange and cooperation, and to promote contact, constructive dialogue and acceptance between third-country nationals and the receiving society"⁸⁵.

In the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027, the European Commission expresses its vision of integration by identifying the parties involved:

The European way of life is an inclusive one. Integration and inclusion are key for people coming to Europe, for local communities, and for the long-term well-being of our societies and the stability of our economies. If we want to help our societies and economies thrive, we need to support everyone who is part of society, with integration being both a right and a duty for all. (...) The challenge of integration and inclusion is particularly relevant for migrants, not only newcomers but sometimes also for third-country nationals who might have naturalised and are EU citizen. This is why the scope of this action plan covers both migrants and EU citizens with a migrant background.⁸⁶

As Dodevska (2024, p. 763) notes, the European Commission extended the scope of integration policies to EU citizens with a migrant background amid the normalisation of “nationalist, nativist, anti-immigration and Islamophobic discourses that were once relegated to the fringe Far Right”.

By contextualising interviewee voices alongside Stubbs' mid-1990s definition of integration, the challenges, successes, and frustrations that have shaped integration in Croatia over the last thirty years can be identified. Stubbs (1996, p. 36) defined integration in a context where “guests” living in Croatia were formerly part of the same state – the SFRY – and “had rights, relatively unhindered, to

⁸⁵ Official Journal of the European Union “Regulation (EU) 2021/1147 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 July 2021 establishing the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund”. L251/1 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32021R1147>.

⁸⁶ European Commission. (2020) “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, The Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions”. COM (2020) 758 final. Brussels <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52020DC0758#footnote3>.

visit, work, and live in the towns and cities in which they are now forced migrants”. Below is his definition of “integration”:

“Integration refers to the attempt to facilitate a sharing of resources - economic and social, an equalising of rights - political and territorial, and the development of cultural exchanges and new cultural forms, between forced migrants and all other members of a society. At the local level, the process of integration involves all sections of the community in minimising social distance, and facilitating communication and co-operation, through creative negotiations which produce new social meanings” (ibid.).

Thirty years later, Petra, active during the large arrivals about ten years ago, offers me her definition of integration:

«we have a lot of similar thing, but what we see always is differences. Integration in my opinion would be that we are founding similarities and then we are acting by this similarities, but at the same time we try to understand our differences. And this you can only do if we encounter with each other».
(Petra)

Petra highlights civil society’s role as a bridge between different communities and institutions:

«So, civil society have a big role in this. Because we are connected to these communities and we are connected to Croatian community. That’s why we usually create this types of events that are intercultural, sharing other cultures, giving the space to people who came to Croatia to show their culture but then put local people in this...it’s really big work, it’s really hard work, but it needs to be done. And then we have this “sector of integration”, which is like education, health, job. (...) Firstly, we also have knowledge and responsibility to share our knowledge to people who are working in these sectors – so: health institutions, social institution, police institutions. We also in [the NGO] are doing sometimes educations specifically for people who are working in the system, in institutions. Because these people also are not sensibilised for this situation, they’re not prepared to have a lot of foreign people here...settled here. And they don’t know what to do with them...I

mean they should have some system, but they don't. So, this is one way that you can do this two-way process of integration with them». (Petra)

Integration, as described by the interviewees, is structured through a two-way process with a central role played by local civil society organisations. In this excerpt, Petra highlights the characteristics of this role, which, on the one hand, involves the creation of new spaces aimed at inclusiveness and exchange, and on the other, promotes a metamorphosis of existing spaces in an intercultural and inclusive way. Working with educational, health and police institutions is important for the latter aspect. These are all sectors that interface with the different needs and profiles of third-country nationals present in Croatia.

Serena highlights how the burden of integration falls heavily on newcomers, while institutions do not act as facilitators of this process:

«We always ask them learn the language, find a job, build your social network, be a good resident, but how? The question is: How? if there are no accessible language courses; Where? if there are no job opportunities or the local society is exploiting them, because that's what we see». (Serena)

Like Serena, Petra also highlights an imbalance between the demands placed on foreigners and the opportunities offered to them. The excerpt presented below highlights the discursive characteristics of the model adopted in Croatia, which is based on a narrative whereby the newcomer must be able to adapt completely to the Croatian lifestyle:

«integration is everything but I think the system wants more a model of assimilation than integration or inclusivity. Because: *They need to speak our language, they need to eat our food, they need to food behave like us, they need to accept our culture* – yes, of course, everything fine, but also why we shouldn't accept something new? Because we will be richer. (...) Somehow this model of assimilation is for the system and for the state, they want to actually do a model of assimilation not integration and inclusion. Then it's also very difficult to fight against this as well, because, again, on the paper is

written integration, but actually is assimilation in the practice. So, we also need to demystifying what actually this country wants. Do you want to assimilate? Because this is impossible». (Petra)

The gap between what is required by the law, “on paper”, and what happens in reality is also highlighted by Dodevska (2024, p. 751): “Integration is notoriously hard to achieve for racialized subjects, yet like boundary liberalism, integrationism inherently offers a promise of membership (at least in principle), as long as the subjects of integration are prepared to undergo a subversion of fundamental characteristics of their identities”. Furthermore, in his analysis, Schinkel (2018, p. 3) observes how the concept of integration, as it emerges from the literature on migration and immigrant integration, has become “un-social” and “un-relational”, “which posits a static object (‘society’) over against individuals whose being signifies a certain degree of ‘integration’ as an individual-level trait”. As also emerged from the excerpts by Serena and Petra, integration becomes individualised – in the sense that “‘integration’ becomes a matter of ‘individual responsibility’” (ibid.), reflecting a “neo-assimilationist” framework (Ambrosini, 2014).

In his study, Stubbs (1996, p. 37) reflected on his collaboration with the NGO *Suncokret* (sunflower in Croatian), an organisation engaged in fostering refugee integration. The author emphasised not only the work carried out with refugees and displaced persons housed in collective centres, but above all the activities that encouraged encounters between these groups and the host civil society. His description of the organisation’s work focuses on the provision of theatre and art workshops, skills training, language classes, sport activities, and more. In all these meetings, the agency of each participant in creating spaces conducive to meeting, learning, and exchange was highlighted.

Indeed, within the broader discourse on inclusion, it is important to consider the capacity of migrants living in a given territory to activate autonomous support networks which, by articulating their needs,

“open up interstices” (Fontanari, 2019, p. 161) that support their settlement processes and help shape the services offered by the host country’s civil society.

Croatian civil society demonstrates a capacity to respond proactively to migration challenges, layering decades of solidarity and activism on top of emergent crises like the 2015 arrivals.

The next section examines the range of activities offered in the city; it is worth reiterating here that the NGOs where the interviewees work have histories that predate or coincide with the long summer of migration in 2015. Only Serena’s NGO was founded a few years later, in 2018. However, these experiences are layered on top of a long history of solidarity. An infrastructure of hospitality and welcome that, to paraphrase Altin’s (2021) analysis of migrants’ journeys along the Balkan route, sinks and resurfaces like karst waters, depending on need. As briefly introduced at the beginning of this section, while since the mid-1990s European institutions have been questioning the issue of integration and what standards of access to rights to guarantee, during the same period, local populations in their daily work have been materially building inclusive and welcoming practices from the bottom up. It is precisely on the question of “what is integration?” that the scalar projects of the various actors in the field emerge, particularly those of the institutions. The European Union’s discursive apparatus on integration collides with Croatia’s spending priorities under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), where, as highlighted in Chapter Three, the bulk of expenditure is absorbed by the improvement of reception infrastructures. Such improvements, however, have been contested by Croatian civil society organisations. It seems reasonable to argue that this disjuncture – between the emphasis placed by the European Commission on forms of integration and the neglect and spatial segregation characterising reception centres in Croatia – constitutes a site of friction within institutions that should not be approached as monolithic.

Furthermore, the difference between these pages and what is reported on Sarajevo is clear. In the Bosnian branch of the Balkan route, the encounter with new arrivals was part of the journey. People

stayed in the capital, often because it was considered a more welcoming place than the border towns, to rebuild their mobility options – to prepare for the game. In Zagreb, however, and in Croatia in general, a new element that has emerged since the arrival of migrants in 2015 is the criminalisation of solidarity, which targeted Croatian citizens who acted to support migrants.⁸⁷

Activities and projects along the route: working with who is visible

The length of migrants' stay in Zagreb is synchronised with the timelines dictated by administrative procedures necessary for determining an individual's legal status within the country. The previous section examined the segmentation of the migrant population residing in the capital: individuals subject to the Dublin Regulation (typically asylum seekers), persons granted a form of protection, and migrant workers. The analysis presented in the preceding pages shows how this urban node along the route functions as a crossroads for multiple forms of mobility – some criminalised, others facilitated; some visible, others rendered invisible. Migrants' tactics intersect with the possibilities and constraints defined by Croatian legislation and its implementation, as well as with the relationships cultivated with NGOs staff members and solidarity initiatives that have been active in the city since the summer of 2015.

This brings us to a key question: within the broader historical trajectory of the Croatian third sector, what types of services have been developed to support the migrant population? To address this, the case study of the city of Zagreb is examined, and – through the voices of interviewees – the de-bordering practices undertaken by civil society actors are outlined.

⁸⁷ Snapshots from the Borders “Criminalisation of Solidarity”. Policy Brief https://www.cms.hr/wp-content/uploads/CPS_Policy_brief_Criminalisation_of_solidarity.pdf.

The NGO where Mira works has been active through various projects since the period of the formal corridor. In Zagreb, the “free shop”⁸⁸ model has developed as a space of solidarity and mutual support, countering the neglect characterising institutional collective centres.

«So free shop has been here from 2016, even though the whole organisation started in providing food and NFIs to people in Green borders, transit camps, around them, in different parts of the humanitarian corridor which existed in 2015... so this is, that part was actually always part of [the NGO] when it was even a spontaneous civil initiative. I think in 2016, they noticed that inside the reception center there was a huge lack of hygiene items and clothes... Which is still like that especially regarding clothes, I would say that there is nothing inside except for children sometimes, something for men».

(Mira)

As in the case of Danijela and Aiša’s NGO in Sarajevo, the organisation where Mira and Ivana work also originated from a spontaneous citizen’s initiative, later taking formal shape as an NGO. The “free shop” service channels the solidarity of the local residents towards the people who access its spaces. During my observations, I noted the responsiveness of Zagreb’s citizens to the organisation’s call for support, usually made through Facebook. I was there one afternoon in September and numerous people entered the NGO’s premises carrying bags and backpacks:

The association is collecting school supplies. People arrive carrying bags filled with notebooks, pens, crayons, and other materials, noting the number of items on the bag. There is a strong sense of solidarity and collective mobilisation. I am told that those who donate are primarily residents of the neighbourhood. I think back to the months spent in Sarajevo and to the arrival of donations in the Bosnian capital. I cannot help but observe that there has been a shift from lorries with containers carrying donations from Central European countries to small, hand-delivered contributions brought directly by the very individuals who chose to donate those materials. This marks a shift from a mode of transnational donation to a context in which support for

⁸⁸ The space, referred to as free shop by the NGOs staff, is usually a room organised like a shop, with donations arranged on clothes hangers, allowing people to try on what they wish and take what they need.

the NGO takes place at the local level and in a more sustained manner.

(Excerpt from the field journal, 04/09/2024, Zagreb)

This observation, written after a day spent with Mira, was confirmed by her during our interview.

Almost all materials distributed by the organisation come from donations made by private citizens:

«the clothes is really being taken here given by the most the people from Zagreb, But we also get like boxes from the rest of the Croatia, but it's all like private citizens with smaller amounts of donations, Which are often most often very well picked and We don't get... maybe previously I think we did, but in the past year and two three months that I'm here we never have a big donation of clothes from another organisation or something it is all just because we have a very good following on Facebook and Instagram and people are well aware of us and also we are maybe one of the three places in whole Zagreb that even accepts clothes...So this is also why we probably have enough mostly enough of the clothes the stuff that is missing is always missing and, which is men clothes is always an issue». (Mira)

In addition to the logistics of humanitarian aid that delivered supplies to Sarajevo – often involving the arrival of containers from various European solidarity initiatives – the “free shop” in Zagreb has become embedded in the city's everyday logistical fabric. Here, pallets are no longer offloaded from trucks arriving from Italy, the Netherlands, or Germany. Instead, private citizens visit the association in person, hand over donation bags, exchange greetings, and quietly leave. Mira seeks to guide this informal exchange and practice of gifting through targeted posts on social media, where she periodically specifies the items or clothing currently in demand.

While the “free shop” embodies a convergence between the NGO staff's commitment to expressing solidarity and the mobilisation of active citizens (Krasteva et al., 2019), the field in which Petra operates focuses more directly on education and awareness within civil society. The organisation she works for has been active in Croatia for over two decades and addresses a broad spectrum of issues

related to integration, advocacy, and legal assistance for asylum seekers. Petra's account of the association includes a description of her specific responsibilities:

«I'm also going to schools, primary schools and high schools. Sometimes they contact us and they want us to come and talk about topics of migration, integration and all of these topics. I like this part of my work, because...now that I passed through all of this, now it's already nine years...I think my role is now to give the knowledge to other people, I probably never again going into the field in the way how I went, and I have a lot of experience and knowledge after this, not just field knowledge, but general knowledge. So, I think that my role now, my mission is to give this knowledge. (...) I like to do this kind of things, going to school. Because I have it but I have to give it, because if it stays with me nothing will change. And I think we are responsible to talk about it. And to share the knowledge. Usually I am the person who go to school, because they all know: *Petra, young people, go! You just go!* (laugh)». (Petra)

Petra's account powerfully underscores the sedimentation and gradual transfer of responsibilities within the field of migration-related work. Having been involved since the outset of the so-called Balkan route, she reflects – nine years later – on how her role has evolved. Whereas she initially worked in direct contact with migrants in Zagreb and along the Bosnian border, she now primarily engages with young Croatian citizens. Within the NGO, she is the one entrusted with attending school-based meetings. This shift towards advocacy and narrative engagement must be situated within a broader framework. As Artero (2019) has observed in relation to the Milanese context – and as is similarly evident in Zagreb – one of the micro-practices of the third sector along the Western Balkan route concerns shaping public attitudes towards the dignified presence of foreigners in the city and in Croatian society more broadly. Moreover, Petra's professional orientation is informed by her own conceptualisation of community, which draws on her theological background and the African philosophical notion of *ubuntu*:

«If you get into the core of every religion is community. To thing is that we have today religions that are more political party, but in the core it's community, it's love, it's sharing, it's solidarity and everything. The main thesis of ubuntu is "I'm because we are" ... and this is how I'm trying to live. This is how my family was living and is living still and this is what I'm trying to create with all of the work I did in my life. Because if somebody have some problem, then the whole community have problem. I'm not talking now globally, I will just narrow to the small community here in Zagreb. We have some people here who are foreigners who are in big shit. They don't speak the language, they don't understand the system, they are totally discriminated, not accepted...all of these things. But they are part of my community, because Zagreb is small place finally, everybody knows each other somehow. And my responsibility is that I'm somehow spreading this idea of living in the community and also is connected to my religion...not religion, my spirituality. And this is what I've learnt from brothers in Bosnia». (Petra)

For Petra, this notion of community finds concrete expression in Bosnia, among *brothers* and *sisters* who endure the violence and hardships of the journey, sustained by their Islamic faith: "The way how they handle it, when a brother came back totally beaten, fucked up and he said 'I'm alive, alhamdulillah.' Or they go to *game*, 'I will get to Italy, inshallah.'" (Petra).

«And then the fact that twenty people living together in some shitty squat or a hundred people live in one camp (...) these twenty people share everything they have, they don't have a lot, but they are sharing it. Not just among themselves, but also with us. I was eating the food they were cooking. I didn't bring this food, it was their food, they got from someone, doesn't matter – they bought. They were sharing it with me, without questions, without asking anything in return. This is what is really necessary and this is what I'm trying to create, because I'm not alone here, you are not alone here...nobody is alone. We are all in one big shit called Croatia (laughs). And we all have some problems. But if I'm able to do something, at least one small thing I will do it». (Petra)

In the following pages, drawing on Petra's account, the focus returns to the micro scale – the realm of the “small things” that materialise as everyday acts of de-bordering. Over the years, such initiatives have multiplied in the capital, yet remain largely absent in other parts of the country. Indeed, a defining feature of the Croatian context is the centralisation of services in Zagreb. One of the most persistent challenges faced by civil society organisations is managing the internal mobility of foreign nationals, who often relocate from Zagreb to the coast in search of seasonal work. On this point, Serena offers her interpretation of the implications and difficulties associated with this centralisation:

«There's still a big margin of improvement and change. Small steps, you know, in our case, if Zagreb has this integration action plan for the integration, great. The opening, not only is here, they open it to the migrant workers as well. Great. But it cannot be just Zagreb. Migrant workers are in all Croatia. There are a lot on the coasts, as well as in other parts, and they have no organisations there. Like there's literally no one. Or a refugee living in Zagreb all the years now he wants to move to another city, somewhere else, maybe it's not willing to be because there's no support there. There's no one. Even the people that work in, for example, social welfare centers, doctors and others, they don't know what are the rights of refugees because they're maybe the first refugee they meet. And then there are complications. And we get requests from here and we're in Zagreb, they're there. You know, it's hard to arrange because they're basically not some organisations outside of Zagreb. It's very centralised here». (Serena)

The role of civil society emerges through everyday experiences – through the “small things” such as the organisation of the “free shop”, the collection of donations, educational interventions in schools, and engagement in sports. These de-bordering practices challenge the exclusionary policies embedded within the national system for migrant reception. At the same time, the stark centralisation of services in the capital, as opposed to other parts of the country, remains evident, raising the risk of producing new geographies of marginalisation (Trudeau, McMorran, 2011). It is within this

entanglement of local actions, systemic vulnerabilities, and everyday forms of resistance that the possibility of imagining – and enacting – more just forms of coexistence and inclusion is negotiated.

Solidarity work vs Borderwork

The research participants highlighted various practices of b/ordering and othering (Van Houtum, Van Naerssen, 2002) that are reproduced in the everyday life of Zagreb. As previously noted in the case of Sarajevo, instances of marginality generated through bordering processes continue to shape the European landscape, where the agenda of reception and integration has been co-opted by the narratives advanced by racist, far-right political parties. Within this context, the city scale (Schiller, Çağlar, 2009) gains particular significance in debates concerning the governance and exclusion of migrants, insofar as “cities have been central to the diversification of borders into everyday life” (Darling, 2017, p. 183). The complex assemblage of the border is re-scaled downward at the municipal level through the “enrolment of an expanded array of authorities, services and professionals into the practice of immigration control, serving to extend responsibility for border policing into new domains of everyday life” (ibid., pp. 183–184). Rumford (2009, pp. 2–3) employs the concept of “borderwork” to underscore how “bordering, debordering and rebordering are no longer the exclusive business of nation-states, or even of the EU” and that “borderwork is very much the business of citizen, of ordinary people”; “People, not just states, engage in bordering activities” (ibid., p. 5), thus inviting us to consider the everyday micro-practices enacted by a wide range of actors.

In Chapter Three, what can be defined as a macro-practice of bordering – namely, the establishment of inhospitable and spatially segregated reception centres – was addressed. In Zagreb, the Hotel Porin serves as an example of this phenomenon. As previously noted, these forms of reception are part of processes of b/ordering and othering (Van Houtum, Van Naerssen, 2002) within urban areas situated along the migration route. Such collective centres are typically located at a distance from central neighbourhoods, often characterised by poor hygienic conditions and minimal institutional effort to

safeguard the rights of individuals residing within them. The Porin reception centre forms part of an ‘archipelago of camps’ (Anderlini, Queirolo Palmas, 2023) along the Western Balkan route, representing the outcome of rescaled EU policies and harmonisation with the *acquis communautaire*. This process is shaped by a persistent, emergency-driven narrative that continues to dominate discourses surrounding asylum and migration across EU member states. Alongside this model of reception, which produces visible forms of segregation and systematic rights violations, micro-practices of bordering – or, borderwork – coexist. Excerpts from Luka and Petra illuminate the contours and implications of these practices in everyday life.

Luka’s football team encountered an administrative border regarding the maximum number of non-EU citizens allowed on youth (under-18) and senior teams. He explained that, in addition to the eleven starting players, the match squad can include up to eighteen players, of whom no more than three may be non-EU citizens. In this excerpt, Luka describes the key arguments on which the team challenged this rule:

«So, we were arguing that (...) while they’re still in the state of asking for asylum they are here under the protection of the Croatian state and, if they get granted asylum, although they do not have nationality, they are granted they are protected by the Croatian state and we argue that they should be counted as Croats. Citizens just for the purpose of registration and they allow that for under eighteen... so kids are excluded from that so we could have and we have had more than three». (Luka)

In the case of minors, the football team succeeded in asserting before the federation the principle that an asylum claims or international protection status implies a commitment on the part of the Croatian government to safeguard the individual, thereby granting them a status equivalent to that of a Croatian citizen. For adults, however, the situation was more complex, as it involved the registration process required to obtain the right to participate in the championship:

«For the grown-ups we didn't get that, but thing that we did we did manage to succeed so if you want to get registered to play for the first team in league competition. It doesn't matter what your nationality you have to get registration, and to get registration you have to ask your football association: "Are you registered in any other club?" and football association looks in their data and says for example if you are moving from Split to Zagreb, you want to registered in Zagreb they ask in football association to Split "is this person registered in the Split club?" they say "no" "okay you're allowed to register". But if you are an asylum seeker running from Nigeria you have to officially ask Nigerian football association to send them your name and full name, your date of birth, your ID, and everything to ask "am I registered in any club? because I want register at this club at this address in this city in this country" and of course people didn't want to do that... and we managed to change that if you are in a process either seeking asylum or got granted asylum you do not have to». (Luka)

Luka's account clearly highlights the bureaucratic barriers imposed by the Croatian Football Association, particularly for non-EU citizens who have applied for or obtained refugee status – individuals with legitimate reasons for avoiding contact with the authorities of their countries of origin. He explains that the change was achieved without pursuing legal action, but rather through initiating a dialogue with the federation and submitting UEFA's official recommendations, supplemented by their own arguments. In this way, they succeeded in achieving systematic change:

«So, yeah those are like kind of two big things for us in an administrative way, that no one was even thinking about before. And we managed to change it and it was important for us... they were like: *Okay we'll make an exception for you...* Don't make it for us! Don't make it for us, because maybe tomorrow we stop existing, but we still think this is good and we managed to change it». (Luka)

In the excerpts presented here, Petra explicitly uses the term "border" to describe the difficulties she encounters when engaging with certain institutions. In her words, the physical border is retranslated

into everyday life – the border becomes a mental map, an organising principle of cognitive processes (Mezzadra, Neilson, 2013):

«I mean borders, I see borders not as a physical borders. I see borders between people. People created borders, people built the border, people decided we need a border. People decided: “We need to protect ourselves from other people”. And then, if you go into institutions there is always some border in the system that you need to cross:

– “Okay the law is like this, but in the practice is like this”

– “Ah okay, but it’s written in the law”

– “No, no, no”

– “Yes!”

– “But this is the practice”

– “But it’s not synchronised!”

So, there I need to cross a border between law and practice and let’s say come into the middle». (Petra)

Her words show how, from a securitarian standpoint, institutions emerge as increasingly inaccessible and less interculturally responsive – spaces where the gap between the law “on paper” and the law in practice widens. It is within this divergence that the solidarity work becomes significant. Such efforts are not limited to exposing the system’s asynchronicities; rather, from an in-between position, they also act as advocates, seeking to uphold the rights of those who are *pushed back* by public administration offices when attempting to access entitlements that are legally theirs.

Returning to the question of borders and the tactics aimed at dismantling them, Petra identifies the relational dimension as the starting point – namely, challenging the border between “us” and “them”:

«I think it is not about to crash the physical borders, we need to crash the borders between people. This is in sense, as I said, to people to understand experiences of other people who are now in a situation where they need to run from their country and go from their country...why we put borders between us and them...there is no us and them...it’s only us, together. I see

the borders between people, not the physical border, even though physical borders of course still...but it's changing people's mind by this you're basically crash the borders. Because more people are aware and have knowledge they don't need to do anything, they can just be aware of it, it's already a big step to crash the physical borders». (Petra)

By focusing on selected examples of borderwork that emerge from participant narratives, it becomes evident that tensions unfold across multiple scales. Petra reflects on the scale of the body (Swyngedouw, 1997), emphasising the relational dimension that solidarity practices activate in everyday life. Deconstructing the border between the self and the “other” becomes the first battleground – one that must be re-scaled in order to ultimately dismantle national physical borders. The in-betweenness of those engaged in solidarity work – or who have direct experience working with migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees – resurfaces in this final excerpt from Petra, where she describes such actors as “messengers” engaged in translation work, seeking to transform public consciousness. This awareness of the dispersion and multiplication of borders also emerged in Sarajevo, as reflected in Danijela's description of her work as «solidarity across the borders, all possible borders, not just the physical ones».

When discussing policy change or access to rights, the operative scale shifts to that of local and national institutions. A clear example is offered by Luka's football team, whose efforts led to a revision of the Croatian Football Association's player registration procedures, thereby dismantling a tangible bureaucratic border. This change now applies to all teams registered in the national league. Moreover, Petra highlights the discretionary nature of the street-level bureaucratic-administrative apparatus. This approach resonates with the work of Nejra and her NGO in Sarajevo, which over the years has brought attention to the gap between legal frameworks and their non-implementation, thereby facilitating the navigation and, at times, the overcoming of administrative borders and bureaucratic obstacles.

What emerges from the solidarity experiences presented here is the crucial role of the third sector and social movement actors in shaping practices that contribute to dismantling the numerous bureaucratic and administrative borders that shape the everyday lives of those (temporarily) residing in Zagreb.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation examines the tension between, on the one hand, the institutional construction of the route as an object of policy and a space of governance over migrant (im)mobility, and, on the other, the everyday practices of solidarity initiatives in Sarajevo and Zagreb, where actors engage with the complexity of migrant trajectories marked by transit, stop-overs and returns.

The analysis is grounded in ethnographic research conducted in two peripheral European capitals shaped by post-socialist and post-conflict legacies. My involvement in local solidarity initiatives made it possible to grasp how past and present struggles intertwines thanks to daily exchanges with research participants. The choice of positioning in Sarajevo and Zagreb proved useful in analysing both the city's role within the route and the practices of support and assistance carried out by local and international NGO staff members within the urban fabric, outside institutional reception centres.

The research project focused on the perspective of solidarity actors, integrating encounters with migrants with extracts from the ethnographic journal documenting informal conversations arising daily during my volunteer activities. Particularly in Sarajevo, the fast pace-mobility of migrants – often staying only a few days – led me to turn the analytical focus on NGO staff members, who outside Temporary Reception Centres (TRCs) engage in solidarity initiatives, spaces, and projects. This focus was subsequently extended within the Schengen Area, in the Croatian capital.

The conceptual framework is articulated with a double aim. Firstly, it proposes a critique of both the policies and institutional narratives that frame the route as a homogeneous space for the imposition of measures aimed at the illegalisation of migrant mobility and at producing a model of reception grounded in the construction of inhospitable and marginalising spaces. Secondly, it highlights how, in the everyday experience of those engaged in solidarity, scales, borders, and infrastructures are

recognised, deconstructed, and re-signified in ways that open cracks within the institutional reception model and forge alliances supporting migrants' struggles for rights.

Through the juxtaposition of different analytical scales (Pál, 2013; Pellegrino, 2024), the tensions become evident: from the materiality of EU funds and budgetary priorities for reception and border control to the everyday encounters among local actors, international NGO staff, migrants, and asylum seekers, from which spaces of solidarity emerge and rights-based practices are enacted. To paraphrase Darling (2017, p. 184), along the Western Balkan route the priorities of European institutions in the governance of migration and reception are manifested in the “everyday spaces of the city”. Cities along the route are thus analysed not as mere repositories of top-down policies, but as sites of tension – as “local battlegrounds” (Dimitriadis et al., 2021; Ambrosini, 2023) – where competing visions of the city shape the urban fabric.

First conclusion: the geopolitical construction of the route as an object of governance

This first conclusion, derived from a macro-level analysis of the Western Balkan route, is informed by an “ethnographic regime analysis” (Tsianos et al., 2009; Tsianos & Karakayali, 2010; Hess, 2012). The findings suggest a blurring of the distinction between the inside and outside of the Schengen Area. Policies implemented by the IOM and Bosnian institutions in Sarajevo and Una-Sana Canton cannot be understood as resistance to EU policy transfer. Rather, they represent a form of alignment with the dominant reception model within EU member states. This regime – centred on the camp as the primary infrastructure of reception – increasingly confines migrants in collective facilities, or in some cases detention centres, for prolonged periods. Bosnia, therefore, should not be seen as “lagging behind” on its path to EU accession but as already aligned with the governance and securitisation narrative that underpin the European migration regime.

This dissertation highlights the multi-scalar character of the infrastructures that sustain inhospitable reception and bordering practices. At the same time, the ethnographic evidence shows how civil society actors have mobilised to create alternative forms of reception, oriented towards encounter and dignity rather than exclusion and containment. The proliferation of collective centres along the Balkan route is best understood as part of a broader “camp archipelago” (Anderlini, Queirolo Palmas, 2023) that spans both accession countries and EU member states. The persistence of such facilities within EU member states, such as Croatia, reflects explicit political choices and resource allocations under the EU’s financial framework, highlighting a disjunction between institutional priorities and civil society observations.

In conclusion, the Western Balkan route should not be approached as a peripheral or exceptional space of migration governance. Rather, it forms an integral part of a European migration regime in which camps and collective centres operate as a key infrastructure of control, confinement, and securitisation, embedding Bosnia within the same political and institutional frameworks that govern migration within EU member states.

Second conclusion: the city scale

Through the voices of interviewees, Sarajevo and Zagreb emerge as distinct yet interconnected sites shaped by both the micro- and macro-dynamics of the Western Balkan route, which intersect with the legacies of the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The juxtaposition of the two ethnographic chapters highlights how their divergent historical trajectories – Sarajevo as a city under siege, Zagreb as a place of refuge – reverberate in contemporary dynamics of solidarity and mobility.

In Sarajevo, solidarity work revolves around the (re)organisation of the journey. Migrants’ tactics and NGOs activities are oriented towards onward mobility, making the city a *rest hub* at the margins

of “the spectacle of migration crisis” (De Genova, 2017). Here, NGOs and activists strategically position themselves to support those in transit, while encounters with migrants generate “urban solidarity spaces” (Arampatzi, 2017) that function as spaces of resource collection, information exchange, and everyday de-bordering practices (Rozakou, 2016). At the same time, bordering processes in Sarajevo affect not only migrants but also Bosnian ethnic minorities, showing how the logics of inclusion and exclusion cut across multiple groups and scales.

In Zagreb, by contrast, the presence of migrants is primarily marked by stasis. Waiting linked to the asylum system, and particularly the constraints of the Dublin Regulation, transforms the city into a space of immobility. Yet Zagreb’s long history of integration – first of people displaced from other parts of former Yugoslavia, and more recently of diverse nationalities arriving since 2015 – continues to shape solidarity practices. These range from direct daily support to campaigning against the unlawful practice of pushbacks and the neglect characterising institutional reception facilities. Solidarity actors have adapted their work to shifting conditions, addressing the needs of the ‘Dubliners’ (Kasperek, 2016), beneficiaries of temporary protection, and migrant workers entering under visa schemes. Thus, Zagreb emerges as a polymorphic space (Jessop et al., 2008) within the Western Balkan route, where solidarity initiatives must continually reconfigure in response to changing mobilities and policy frameworks.

Taken together, these cases illustrate how the city scale is a crucial vantage point for understanding the Western Balkan route. Sarajevo operates as a *rest hub* of temporary (im)mobility and resource (re)collection, while Zagreb embodies stasis and layered histories of integration. Both demonstrate that cities are not mere backdrops to migration, but ever-changing arenas where solidarity, mobility, and institutional governance intersect and where the everyday contestation of bordering practices unfold.

Third conclusion: practicing solidarity along the route

Through an ‘in place’ ethnography (Lindquist, 2009), I observed how different actors, triggered by the arrival of migrants, have given rise to “urban solidarity spaces” (Arampatzi, 2017) – “stations” (Queirolo Palmas, Rahola, 2020) where goods, information, and relationships circulate. These infrastructures “work on time and space” (Mitchell, 2020) of migrants’ journeys, and create places in where dignity and rights are upheld, thereby resisting both the micro-practices of borderwork (Rumford, 2009) and visible processes of b/ordering and othering (Van Houtum, Van Naerssen, 2002).

A central element that emerged is the role of the encounter (Rozakou 2016; Wilson, 2017) as a driver of de-bordering: it guides decisions about where to open the NGO, reshapes the idea of community, while assuming different temporalities – sometimes fleeting, sometimes sustained, depending on the geopolitics of the route. While this study primarily reflects the perspectives of NGO staff members, it clearly shows their commitment to incorporating the agency of migrants into everyday support practices. Many activists initially engaged in informal solidarity activities and later institutionalised their efforts by founding NGOs, thereby politicising everyday practices of their organisations which, though not overtly confrontational, nonetheless challenge the European model of migration governance. The active involvement of Bosnian and Croatian citizens who participated in the research reflects a stance that resonates with solidarity citizenship (Krasteva et al., 2019) – that is, an effort to move beyond a discourse that marginalises and segregates migrants, while simultaneously advocating for a transformation of the public space.

The territorial differences reinforce this interpretation. In Bosnia, shared past experiences (Tazzioli, Walters, 2019; Giliberti, Queirolo Palmas, 2024) and the visibility of violence – pushbacks and segregation in the TRCs – shape solidarity practices rooted both in border villages and in urban contexts. In Croatia, by contrast, being located within the Schengen Area makes micro-practices of

exclusion more salient: here, solidarity focuses on dismantling symbolic boundaries between “us” and “them”, engaging with younger generations and maintaining dialogue with institutions.

In conclusion, solidarity along the Western Balkan route can be understood as a daily infrastructure: a set of practices arising from encounters, generating spaces of dignity and rights, and politicising ordinary acts of care and aid while questioning the logics of confinement and segregation that underpin the EU migration governance.

Final remarks

This dissertation demonstrates that the Western Balkan route is a space of tension: on the one hand, a geopolitical construct of multi-scalar governance aimed at controlling and illegalising migrant mobility and solidarity initiatives; on the other, a lived space where encounters and friendships are forged, giving rise to solidaristic practices that uphold dignity and guarantee access to rights. By examining both the macro-level infrastructures of reception and confinement and the micro-level encounters that generate everyday solidarity, the research highlights how cities along the route function as polymorphic spaces of negotiation. The cases of Sarajevo and Zagreb show how the everyday experience of (im)mobility along the route is shaped by ongoing contestation, in which solidarity actors play a crucial role in identifying and deconstructing the proliferation of borders within their own societies.

In closing, conceptualising solidarity as infrastructure provides a powerful lens for understanding how networks of support endure and adapt across shifting policy regimes, histories of conflict, and struggles for dignity and rights. As a daily practice along the Western Balkan route, solidarity demonstrates the persistence of actions that operate across multiple scales: rooted in the local yet extending beyond national boundaries. Everyday acts of care, listening, and support – though modest in appearance – constitute meaningful forms of resistance that challenge institutional logics of

exclusion and confinement, while at the same time contributing to the broader struggle for the recognition of the right to freedom of movement for all.

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