# Hope, Waiting, and Mobility

## Migrant Movement in Serbia After The EU-Turkey Deal

ROBERT RYDZEWSKI

**Abstract:** This paper analyses the Balkan route after the closure of the formalised corridor through the Balkan Peninsula to the EU. It emerges from maps and non-governmental organisation reports—which most often depict a one-way, linear migrant journey and subsequent entrapment in camps in Greece, Macedonia, and Serbia—and juxtaposes this with migrant narratives. By March 2016, the movement of migrants in Serbia had not stopped. Despite great efforts towards militarising external European Union borders, the push-backs and violence of border guards, and the structural and institutional *imposition of waiting*, migrants persisted in trying to move. They rarely stayed in government-run transit and asylum centres but instead travelled around Serbia: not only from south to north but also from north to south and in any other direction. In light of these considerations, key questions arise: What does this movement mean for migrants? Why have migrants often rejected state protection offered by government facilities in favour of traveling around the country, thus exposing themselves to danger? I argue that migrant movement on the doorstep to the EU is an expression of hope to bring »the stuckedness« to an end.

**Keywords:** Hope, waiting, migration, Balkan route, stuckedness

On one late night in Subotica, a border town in northern Serbia, I saw a few groups of ten to fifteen people each walking northwards. In a town that had already fallen asleep, they were the only visible pedestrians. At the central bus station, I saw dozens of migrants, mainly young males with small backpacks. Some of them were crouching against the bus station wall, drinking energy drinks and checking Google Maps. A few metres further on, others were crowded around an extension cord where they were charging their phones. For them, the day was clearly not over yet as they seemed to be waiting for something. The rest of the young, single, male travellers[1] were preparing for sleep: they unfolded their sleeping bags and blankets by the main entrance of the bus station. Outside the bus station, several taxis were lined up, and the drivers were chatting with each other while facing the waiting migrants. I approached a kiosk by

**1 |** The description »single, male traveller« refers to the status of migrants during their journey and does not reflect marital status.

the main entrance and spoke to a man sitting on a white plastic garden chair near an ice cream freezer. I asked about the unusual agitation and how it was combined with the boredom of waiting at these late hours. He explained to me that he and other taxi drivers were waiting until late at night to take migrants to the Serbian-Hungarian border area. Since the EU-Serbian border was sealed, migrants rarely managed to cross it on the first try. Thus, they moved through the country in search of accommodation, provisions, information, and other possibilities to cross the border.

This short observation from Subotica, a departure point for migrants to the European Union (EU), contradicts the predominant media reports and maps in 2015 and 2016 that depicted migrants' movement through the Balkan Peninsula as linear and unidirectional—from south to north. Shortly after, the media depictions of the one-way movement were replaced by stranded, passive migrants stuck in unofficial settlements in Idomeni, on the Greek-Macedonian border, or in Horgoš, on the Serbian-Hungarian border. Instead of giving an accurate account of migrant mobility, these pictures, graphs, maps, and other visualisations of either unidirectional migrant trajectories or stranded migrants rather obscured it. This is of importance because visual representations of migrant movement have a particular authority and persuasive effect in political and social debates (see Newhouse 2018: 90).

The Balkan corridor—the formalised migratory passage created in the first months of 2015 and shut down by March 2016—was possible upon the introduction of a 72-hour travel permit for migrants in Serbia and North Macedonia and led to an increase of border crossings (see Beznec/Speer/Stojić Mitrović 2016: 16, 46). In this exceptional period, the people who had the strength and resources could reach Northern and Western Europe somewhat feasibly: crossing three borders between Greece and Hungary could take as little as a few days. Moreover, in 2015 and 2016, 14 so-called temporary reception centres—an important part of the corridor's infrastructure—were built by the Serbian government with support of the EU and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The purpose for most of them was to register and provide short-term respites for those traveling via the Balkan corridor. Therefore, migrant journeys, although hectic, were safer and faster because of relatively open borders and state-supported means of transport. However, at the beginning of 2016, two EU-third country agreements introduced new rules of EU border control, which put the Balkan states and migrants in a predicament.[2]

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**2 |** The first deal was between the Austrian Interior Minister, Johanna Mikl-Leitner, and representatives of the Western Balkan countries. It launched a wave of border closures along the Balkan corridor in February 2016. This was followed by another agreement, during which the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, and the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip

Months before the implementation of the EU-Turkish deal, the Balkan corridor was gradually being closed down. Slovenia, following the example of Austria, set a limit on migrant arrivals to their country via the Balkan corridor and was the first to introduce a selection process. Its logic was supposedly based on national, racial, religious, and language criteria and was marked by arbitrariness, intimidation, and violence by law enforcement officers (see Hameršak/Pleše 2018: 21). Consequently, the states along the corridor closed its borders first to everyone but Syrians, Afghanis, or Iraqis, and directed most of their efforts towards filtering rather the excluding migrants (see Picozza 2017: 78; Hameršak/Pleše 2018: 21). The selective admission of migrants caused the number of stranded people in the Balkan Peninsula to rise. It led to the creation of large unofficial settlements, like the one in Idomeni in Greece or those in Horgoš and Belgrade in Serbia, exposing migrants to sudden disruptions of their journey and extended periods of waiting. As a result, migrant movements after the closing of the Balkan corridor were highly dangerous and slow due to shrinking state facilitation and migrants' limited access to NGOs. These journeys did not just take days but months or even years.

The introduction of border controls based on the filtering of wanted and unwanted migrants heralded the end of the formalised corridor through the Balkan Peninsula to Northern or Western Europe, but it did not shut down the Balkan route entirely (Beznec/Speer/Stojić Mitrović 2016): the movement of migrants towards the EU slowed down but did not stop. Despite great efforts towards militarising external EU borders, and in spite of the push-backs and violence of border guards, and the structural and institutional »imposition of waiting«, migrants persisted in trying to move and reach the EU. This refers particularly to single males because these journeys are too dangerous and exhausting for families. Single travellers rarely stayed in the government facilities for long periods,[3] but instead moved around Serbia—not only from south to north but also from north to south and indeed in any other direction. What did this movement mean to them?

This article aims to reconstruct the representation of migrant journeys to the EU. By focusing on the geographical movements of migrants around Serbia in the first year(s) after the closure of the Balkan corridor (and before transit changed to Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2018), I explore the relationship between time, space, and the meaning of movement on the fringes of the EU. I challenge the perception that the

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Erdoğan, agreed on closing the marine borders between the EU and Turkey and externalising immigration control to Turkey (see Üstübici/İçduygu 2019: 198).

**3 |** In that period, government facilities for migrants in Serbia were divided into asylum centres and temporary reception- or temporary transit centres.

movement of migrants is unidirectional and demonstrate that it is constantly interrupted, can move in a reverse direction, or even become circular. By doing so, I want to highlight migrant experiences and understand human reaction to geographical entrapment by linking the concepts of hope, waiting, and mobility. I argue that the »hyper mobility« (Fontanari 2019) of migrants on the doorstep of the EU is an expression of hope in times of »stuckedness« (Hage 2009b).

## Defining the Method and Research Focus

In this article, I draw on ethnographic research carried out from October 2015 to October 2016 in Serbia: in Preševo, on the southern Serbian-Macedonian border and in Subotica and its surroundings, close to the Serbian-Hungarian border. Preševo was a »hotspot« during the »long summer of migration« (Kasparek/Speer 2015), when around one million migrants reached Europe's borders. During that summer, migrants entering Serbia lined up for several hours, and in extreme cases days, at the Preševo temporary reception centre for permission to transit through Serbia. Later, the centre offered accommodation and various kinds of support provided by NGOs. In contrast, Subotica was a kind of gateway to the EU, with poorly equipped government facilities for migrants and minimal NGO presence, which can be understood as part of a securitisation practice to keep migrants far from the EU external borders.

Alongside the fieldwork conducted in these two locations, I also visited migrants in other government centres and unofficial settlements scattered around the country. For most of my time in the field, I was engaged in volunteer grass-roots organisations,[4] providing support to migrants on their journey. Our work consisted of distributing food and items, providing information about the current situation along the Balkan corridor and psychological support. As such, my research turned into activist re-

**4 |** My research group consisted of mainly single, male travellers, which was initially not the aim of the research project in itself but rather a result of the process of the fieldwork. The volunteer aid points for distributions were stopover points, which are in themselves a selection mechanism (see Newhouse 2018: 88). The main recipients of assistance given from grassroots organisations operating outside of government facilities were mostly single, male travellers, whose access to state facilities were hindered, and who were therefore both more visible in public spaces and more in need of assistance than families or single females. Their attachment to, and reliance on, grassroots operations was also caused by the NGOs working in Serbia as they regarded single, male travellers a low priority and less in need of help.

search, which presumes acquiring theoretical knowledge through action (Hale 2006; Goldstein 2014; Sandri 2017; Picozza 2017).

Activist research can give access to migrants *en route*, who often stay far from the public eye (Coutin 2005). As a part of the volunteers' group that distributed food and non-food items, I had access to migrants in unofficial settlements and hideouts but, more importantly, they contacted me and often asked for support. Hence, it gave me access to their whereabouts, needs, and emotional state. My research was combined with George Marcus' concept of multi-sited ethnography that allows one to follow migrants' histories in different parts of the globalised world and search for unexpected connections between places and contexts (1995). I thus followed migrants on their journey through Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, and Hungary in 2015 and 2016. Additionally, between 2016 and 2018, I visited some of them, by which point they had either reached their destination countries and/or were still on the way as »Dubliners« (Picozza 2017).[5] This helped me to understand their multidirectional journeys though Southeastern Europe and its changing conditions.

As highlighted by Michael Collyer and Hein de Haas (2012), naming those who are on the move has become highly problematic within research on migration to Europe. The ambiguity in defining people on their way to Europe was also perceivable in the case of Serbia: I asked a UNHCR officer in the Preševo temporary centre how they categorised people who were stranded in Serbia, since they rarely applied for asylum there, and their transit documents had often expired. In response, he told me that these people were »persons in need of international protection«. Such a group is defined by the UNHCR as people who may not qualify as refugees but may, nevertheless, in certain circumstances require international protection (see 2018: 138). This status did not have its equivalent within the Serbian law and practice, thus, migrants who stayed in Serbia longer than 72 hours were technically ›illegal‹ but were tolerated by the state authorities. This kind of »liminal legality« creates an excluded population and ensures a vulnerability and precariousness on the side of migrants by blurring the boundaries between legality and illegality (see Menjívar 2006: 1002). Therefore, »persons in need of international protection« in the Serbian context is a rather vague category and proves that there is still a conceptual and methodological problem in studying transit migration.

Scholars have argued against fixed definitions of who can be labelled as *transit* migrant concerning essential characteristics, such as time-space, location-direction, state perspective, or cause of migration (see Collyer/de Haas 2012: 470; Içduygu/

**5 |** »Dubliners« are border crossers that are forced to move in order, for example, to find a job, to secure some administrative status, or to escape Dublin deportations.

Yükseker 2012: 452; Hess 2012: 429). They have shown that being in »transit« can be a year-long endeavour, and that it is not a spatial question linked to the underlying premise of a linear crossing from country of origin to destination. Instead, transit can mean a protracted situation of criss-cross mobility (see Hess 2012: 429), changing legal status (see Collyer/de Haas 2012: 472), and exploitation and stigmatisation (see Bredeloup 2012: 464). The protractedness, as Sabine Hess explains, is an effect of the European border regime »as a territorial and space making policy par excellence« (ibid.: 431). Furthermore, the category of transit is a relatively new political invention that comes along with the definition of certain countries as transit countries (ibid.). Therefore, transit migration is not only hard to define but also an unfruitful category on an epistemological level. By deconstructing the notion of *transit*, these researchers have opposed the linear understanding of migrant journeys that imagines a clearly defined country of origin and destination, and have instead opted for notions that reflect changing migration conditions, including the legal status of migrants, and have helped to understand the fluidity and dynamism of the migration process. Following this discussion, and considering my research participants' self-titling as migrants, I have decided to refer to them as *migrants stuck in mobility* (Hess 2012) in order to underline their heightened geographical mobility between borders and simultaneous inability to either go back or move forward.

## From Fragmented Journeys to Hyper Mobility at the Doorstep of the EU

Fragmented and multidirectional migrant routes have been explored by other researchers (Collyer 2007; 2010; Hess 2012; Fontanari 2019; Newhouse 2018; Picozza 2017). Geographer Michael Collyer, who focuses on migration across Maghreb countries, claims that »stranded migrants« and »fragmented journeys« »are both key elements of ›mixed migration‹ which capture the essential character of the protection requirements of migrants in this situation« (Collyer 2010: 279). On the one hand, journeys are interrupted by natural barriers and increasingly effective, violent immigration control. Within the scope of fragmented migration, failures play a key role: deportations, robberies, and detentions all have a decisive impact on the depletion of financial resources, the amount of possibilities and changing shapes of migration routes (see Collyer 2007, 2010). On the other hand, these journeys are sustained by technological developments, such as instant money transfers and new ways of communication (see Collyer 2010: 276). Thus, fragmented journeys imply the multiplicity and complexity of migration motivations, living and working conditions, forms

of survival, and changing legal statuses of migrants. The fragmented character of the movement contributes to the vulnerability of, and protection needed by, stranded migrants unable to continue their journey or go back (see ibid.: 288).

Another important piece of research when analysing migrant movement to Europe has been presented in the book *Lives in Transit* (Fontanari 2019). Its author, Elena Fontanari, conducted anthropological, multi-sited research among migrants travelling to the EU via the Mediterranean Sea. Fontanari shows that even after reaching their destination country, migrants continue to move around in search of work and better living conditions. She explains that the hyper mobility of migrants within the EU borders is a »product of protracted transit having being forced by bureaucratic procedure due to the short-term nature of document validity« (ibid.: 172). Hyper mobility is interlaced with »fragmented circuits« caused by endless waiting for resident permits, queuing for food, accommodation, and repetitively applying for subsidiary protection, which, in the end, leads to a prolonged, precarious, and unsettled life (ibid.: 94). The findings of Collyer and Fontanari correspond with my research. However, I suggest that migrants maintain their geographical mobility also at the margins of the EU. The movement on the doorstep of the EU helps migrants to wait out the time of entrapment in the protracted journey. Even if it appears senseless or circular, the movement gives hope and reduces the feeling of being stuck during prolonged stays in temporary reception centres or asylum centres. Thus, the ability to move during periods of a structural and institutional »imposition of waiting« is essential to endure it. The movement is also an expression of the agency of individuals who are stuck between the borders. All this allows me to expand Fontanari's argument that hyper mobility is an effect of the anti-migration sentiments of European bureaucrats.

There is a difference between the imposed hyper mobility that I could observe on the margins of the EU and the forced mobility within the EU observed by Fontanari (ibid.). She argues that hyper mobility, alongside the fragmented circuits of migrants after reaching the EU, has negative effects. Her research participants were forced into hyper mobility which, in turn, brought uncertainty and distrust towards state institutions and, in the long run, hopelessness (see ibid. 2019: 49, 154–159, 196). The case of Serbia is different. Analysing the migrants' movements, as well as informal conversations and interviews, I would claim that the migrant movements on the doorstep of the EU brought them hope of crossing the border and of eventually reaching a safe country with the possibility to develop a sustainable existence. The notion of hope appears in the research of scholars like Fontanari (2019) and Florenza Picozza (2017), but they tend to focus more on structural or legal conditions for movement and individual practices. In this text, I would like to contribute to the discussion on

migrant movement by analysing the role of migrant desires and aspirations in shaping migrants' trajectories.

I will show that the expectation of a better future was a main catalyst of the hyper mobility of migrants. In other words, in order to be able to maintain hope, migrants were moving. This meant that they sometimes avoided the government facilities which provided accommodation and food because they also restricted their movements, especially during the time of closing the Balkan corridor, when the Serbian state tried to re-establish control over migration and turned toward securitisation and preventing unwanted migration (Stojić Mitrović 2019). In that period, many NGO-run centres supporting migrants were shut down and migrants were removed from public spaces, such as parks and train stations (see Beznec/Speer/Stojić Mitrović 2016: 58). As a result, migrant movement and thus agency was restricted. During this time, the Preševo temporary reception centre was converted into a closed camp.[6] In March 2016, a 58-year-old male from Iraq, whom I escorted to a shop, told me, »We don't need money, we don't need this [pointing at a bag with groceries like Coca Cola, Milka chocolate and other delights, bought thanks to some pocket money provided by an NGO]. We need to go, start to work, live.«

Below, using interviews, brief chats, and observations, I will reconstruct the trajectories of migrants' movements after the closure of the Balkan corridor in March 2016. The journeys during what the literature describes as the »long summer of migration« greatly differ from those that took place before and after the EU-Turkey agreement was introduced.

## Reconstructing Movements after the Closure of the Balkan Corridor

At the beginning of August 2016, I met 16-year old Sayad at the bus station in Subotica in northern Serbia. At that time, migrants could seek asylum in Serbia, try to cross the border in irregular ways, apply for family reunification, register for the assisted voluntary return program, or sign up to the waiting list to enter the Hungarian transit zone. Sayad, like all my research participants, came through Turkey. Afterwards, they had travelled through southern EU countries: some took the land route

**6 |** Temporary reception centres had been changing the rules of migrants' admission and release. In March 2016, migrants were allowed to temporarily leave the temporary reception centre in Preševo only if escorted by an NGO worker who guaranteed his or her return to the centre.

through Bulgaria, whereas others travelled across the Aegean Sea, Greece, and Macedonia. Both routes finally met in Serbia. My research participants, Sayad included, started their journey when the formalised corridor was still open, but did not manage to reach the EU before the closure and, as a consequence, were stranded in Serbia in 2016. The last of them entered the EU three years later, in March 2019.

Sayad did not want to register on the waiting list, because, as he said, »You never know what Europeans can come up with.« He feared that once he tried the official way, border guards would take his fingerprints and enter them into the EURODAC database.[7] This could hinder his asylum requests in EU countries other than Hungary due to the Dublin Regulation. Another reason for Sayad not taking the official way was the imposed waiting at the transit zones on the Serbian-Hungarian border, which in practice meant waiting in the temporary reception centre, checking the list every couple of days, and counting down the days for his turn.

## Creating Institutionalised Waiting

Signing up to the waiting list did not guarantee fast transfer to Hungary. In summer 2016, the Hungarian border police allowed fifteen persons per zone per working day to access the militarised transit zones in Tompa and Röszke on the Hungarian side of the Serbian- Hungarian border, which remains the only place where migrants can seek asylum. The transit zones consist of a closed-off blue shipping container village constructed in 2015 along the fence at the southern Hungarian border that is armed with barbwire and high-tech surveillance systems. During this period, families and minors had to stop there for an asylum interview and were transferred the same day to the open camps inside Hungarian territory. Single, male travellers, however, had to stay in shipping containers 29 days longer, supposedly to verify the data from their asylum interviews.[8] They were not allowed to leave the containers unless they agreed to return to Serbia.

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**7 |** EURODAC (European Asylum Dactyloscopy Database) is a large-scale IT-system that indicates responsibility for examining an asylum application by comparing fingerprint datasets of migrants.

**8 |** At the beginning of March 2017, the Hungarian Parliament adopted a set of amendments allowing for the automatic detention of all asylum seekers while their applications were processed. This meant that, in reality, detention in the transit zone lasted months or even years (Hungarian Helsinki Committee 2017).

In spring and summer of 2016, the Hungarian state created structural and institutional conditions of waiting in Serbia to cross the border, where peoples' lives were. Migrants waited for months under Hungarian state surveillance in the camps in pre-transit zones or temporary reception centres on the Serbian side and later in shipping containers on the Hungarian side. The everyday existence there was filled with boredom and poor living conditions —no kitchen or washing machine (and, particularly in the unofficial settlements, no showers). The Hungarian state thus created a condition of waiting in which migrants were deprived of state protection, the right to self-determination, and dignity. The rhythm was set by lining up for the distribution of food or non-food items, either in the temporary reception centres in Subotica, at the bus station, or in the camps in the pre-transit zone. These activities were interspersed with efforts to collect more financial resources, to contact smugglers, or those who had already crossed the border. Single, male travellers had to wait longer because priority was given to families, females, and minors. For single men there were only one or two places left per day. It meant that if all migrants who stayed in Serbia in summer 2016 had registered, the last one would still not have crossed the border by spring 2017. However, even with a long-term perspective, entering the EU seemed unrealistic. The number of people accepted into Hungary was shrinking, and the number of migrants staying in Serbia was growing. In January 2017, only five persons per zone per day were accepted. Consequently, the time of waiting became potentially indefinite.

If anthropologists Synnøve Bendixsen and Thomas Eriksen Hylland are right in arguing that once we accept waiting, we are stripped of control over our own time (see Bendixsen/Eriksen 2018: 92), then waiting generates not only vulnerability and humiliation but also dependency and lack of personal autonomy (see Fontanari 2019: 195). In creating the condition of waiting in precarious and unsafe environments for an unpredictable amount of time, the Hungarian state exercised power in the Foucauldian sense. Foucault claims that the state's disciplinary power is exercised over modern society by the control of people's time (see 1994: 80). This observation resonates with the work of Mikko Joronen who, in the context of his research on activities of the Israeli state towards Palestinian refugees, argues that the creation of a »space of waiting« is a powerful tool for governing populations (see Joronen 2017: 995). Thus, waiting involves disciplinary politics and power relations: who is waiting for whom. However, power relations not only dictate who has the power to stop and suspend someone's life (Hage 2009a: 2) but also what the conditions of waiting are and under what circumstances the right to move can be regained.

## VIOLENCE AS METHOD OF THE BORDER DETERRENCE

A few days after learning Sayad's story, I met Gebre, an Eritrean in his late 20s. Along with a few other migrants, he paid for a smuggler to aid them to cross the Serbian-Hungarian border. They cut some wires from the fence's netting as well as the barbed wire that secured its lower portion. One by one, they wriggled through a relatively small hole. But the noise from the fence alerted the border guards, positioned every two hundred meters apart, who shouted and ran towards the migrants. A number of Gebre's travel companions managed to disperse into the woods, but Gebre and three other migrants were apprehended and taken for interrogation. There, the detainees were harassed and beaten by the border guards, who threatened to rape them if they did not disclose the size of their group, the identity of the smuggler, and their plan for crossing the border. Then, they pepper-sprayed the migrants, beat them again, and pushed them out through a gate in the fence back to Serbia. After walking for a few hours, Gebre arrived at the bus station in Subotica where Doctors Without Borders (MSF) workers were dressing the wounds of those who had unsuccessfully tried to enter the EU the previous night.

On 5th of July 2016, Hungary introduced the »eight-kilometre rule« allowing the deportation of migrants caught within eight kilometres from the border. From then on, the push-backs, like the one described above, became notorious along the Serbian-Hungarian border. According to the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, during the period between the 5th of July and 31st of December 2016, 19,057 people were denied access to the asylum system, that is, either were prevented from entering Hungary or were caught and escorted back to the Serbian border (Hungarian Helsinki Committee, s.a.). The repeated push-backs evolved into a tool to remove migrants from the country and to prevent people from seeking protection on their territory. The vast majority of these push-backs have a collective character, they are undertaken without consideration of the individual circumstances of each person, without legal assistance or an interpreter, and without the possibility of appeal (which would usually suspend any possibility of expulsion while an appeal is pending). As such, the push-backs violate Article 4 of Protocol No 4 of the European Convention on Human Rights (OXFAM 2017).

This violent chain refoulement was a common experience reported by my research participants. Migrants were repeatedly pushed back, not only from Hungary or Croatia to Serbia but also from Serbia to Macedonia and Bulgaria. During these illegal expulsions, migrants were heavily beaten, pepper-sprayed, bitten by dogs, and robbed

of their shoes and of their mobile phones, which hindered their further movements.[9] Border violence all along the Balkan route has been omnipresent. For example, MSF have stated in their annual activity report for Serbia to have assisted thousands of people stranded in the appalling conditions around the Subotica between April and November 2016. They carried out 7,407 medical consultations and have registered a steady and significant increase in various violence-related traumas (see MSF 2017: 83). In the given period, MSF treated 82 people for dog bites, irritations from tear gas and pepper spray, and injuries from beatings inflicted on them while attempting to cross the Serbian-Hungarian border (ibid.).

## MOBILITY

After a four-day rest in the temporary reception centre in Subotica, Sayad again tried to cross the border. He walked with a group of friends following the path displayed by their phones' GPS. They kept only one phone on at a time, to limit signals, which, as they learned from the smugglers, could reveal their position to border guards. They marched eastwards for 20 hours along the northern Serbian border trying not to be detected by drones and helicopters patrolling the border. They wrongly assumed that the further they were from bigger settlements, the easier it was to enter the EU. The plan was to cross the border and get far into the Hungarian interior unnoticed—ideally all the way to Austria. But the plan backfired. Border guards pushed back migrants through randomly selected gateways, which made it difficult and longer to find their way back to a town or temporary reception centre and, in turn, increased their geographical mobility. In spite of these failures, they did not give up. A few days later Sayad told me, »Tonight, I will try, inshallah, to cross, but I don't know if I will succeed or not. We try every three or four days. We do not have any other choice.«

After several attempts, Sayad realised that getting to Hungary was impossible, so he travelled to Šid instead, a town in western Serbia on the border with Croatia. There, together with his friend, he cut a tarpaulin covering the trailer of a truck, snuck in and hid behind the cargo. But the heat detectors at the border had no difficulties in finding them. The border guards sent them back to the border again. In the middle of September, Sayad travelled to Subotica and later back to Šid and Belgrade in search of better living conditions and food. When the border crossers were tired of these

**9 |** According to my observations, these atrocities by the border guards and police officers were directed equally to all migrants, regardless of gender, age, or nationality.

constant failures, they looked for a place to rest. They even travelled 700 km south, to the temporary reception centre in Preševo, to make sure they had a decent place to sleep.

The hyper mobility of migrants that helps them withstand the periods of suspension and cross the border can be understood as an expression of agency, which does not appear within a vacuum but rather always within the wider social and political structure and as a response to the workings of the border regime. Thus, the hyper mobility of these migrants was triggered by the structural changes at the local and international level. Migrant movement in Serbia was unconstrained during the research period in comparison to Croatia or Macedonia where movement was controlled by either government or criminal groups (see Beznec/Speer/Stojić Mitrović 2016: 14). Serbian authorities, particularity until late summer 2015, gave migrants relative freedom to travel within the country and built various transit centres that enhanced mobility. For example, migrants' documents were not checked upon purchasing a ticket at a bus or train station. If they did not have one, migrants were asked to leave the train but were back on their way in a matter of minutes.

Like Sayad, Gebre's story also illustrates the determination to move and attempt to cross the border, a process that was interspersed with stays in both government facilities and unofficial settlements. Gebre and fifteen other migrants boarded a taxi at the Subotica bus station which took them to the vicinity of the Serbian-Hungarian border, but, once there, their attempt to cross was thwarted. Discouraged from trying to enter Hungary by the aggression of the border guards and the state-of-the-art surveillance system embedded in the demarcation line between Serbia and Hungary, he signed up to the waiting list to cross the border through official channels. But Gebre did not want to wait in temporary centres for months for his turn, and so he travelled to the Serbian-Croatian border to check the possibilities of entering the EU from there. In spite of the absence of a fence, crossing that border there was no easier than the one in the north of the country. Croatian border guards effectively intercepted migrants inside Croatian territory and pushed them back over the border to Serbia. To begin with, Croatian border guards simply drove migrants back to the Serbian border and, as far as I have been told, did not regularly use physical violence in that period. However, it would be only a matter of time before brutality by Croatian border guards became a method of border deterrence (Oxfam 2017; Human Rights Watch 2017).

The closure of the Balkan corridor was not limited to violence and heightened border control by the EU and non-EU countries. In August 2016, Serbian authorities curbed access to government facilities and changed the rules of admission (see Beznec/Speer/Stojić Mitrović 2016: 63). Migrants at government facilities were asked to legalise their stay in one of a handful of ways: for example, apply for fam-

ily reunification, register for the assisted voluntary return program, or sign up to the waiting list to enter the Hungarian transit zone. Migrants in response expressed the will to seek asylum in Serbia. However, from 2008 to 2016, most of the migrants in Serbia abandoned their asylum procedures before their cases were resolved (see Belgrade Centre for Human Rights 2017: 39).

Facing a challenge to accommodate the rising number of migrants in the country, the Serbian authorities balanced containing them in government facilities with controlling their movement within the country. Accommodating migrants or pushing them further to another state was a continuous dilemma for the Serbian state. On the one hand, Serbia did not want to become a container for unwanted migrants in the EU. On the other hand, the state had to respect different agreements with the EU and non-EU countries that obligated them to secure the border, prevent so-called irregular migration, and react to the growing pressure from the wider international community to fulfil the needs of the migrants stranded in Serbia (Stojić Mitrović 2019). Therefore, Serbian officials conditionally allowed civil society groups to provide support to migrants on the move, hoping that the latter would find a way to leave Serbia.

The Serbian government not only toughened up the rules of admission to government facilities but also tried to remove migrants from public spaces. Migrants with no asylum application or proof of having registered themselves on waiting lists slept in public spaces, such as parks, train stations, or abandoned buildings, effectively renouncing state protection and risking arrest. Sayad was among those who consciously left a government facility. He said he preferred to move between cities than stay in temporary reception centres and risk being locked up in there: »This is why I change, sometimes to Subotica and sometimes Šid. I want to go outside of Serbia. I want to move forward.« As aptly presented by Picozza, the migrants' freedom or relative autonomy comes with the price of »illegality« (see Picozza 2017: 77).

An increasingly large body of literature illustrates that migrant routes take opposite directions and their destinations are often indeterminate (Khosravi 2010; Collyer/de Haas 2012; Newhouse 2018). They are shaped by various factors and actors: smugglers, heightened border control, closing migration routes, or rumours etc., while their course and destinations are dictated by the weather, smugglers' fees and numerous other factors. However, as I will illustrate in the next section, these are not the only reasons why migrant movement is not unidirectional.

## Hope as a Generator of Movement

The single men travelling alone undertook ongoing efforts to continue their journey. The driving force behind this exertion was the hope to liberate themselves from stuckedness; from immobility and suspension between the borders. Ghassan Hage claims that stuckedness occurs in a situation in which a person »suffers from both the absence of choices or alternatives to the situation they are in and an inability to grab such alternatives even if they present themselves« (2009b: 98). By comparison, hope can be understood as waiting while working to make something happen (see Procupez 2015: 63). During casual conversations and interviews with my research participants, they tended to repeat such words as »I hope« or »inshallah«. Although *inshallah* in its Quranic meaning denotes the supersedence of human will by God, it should not be taken here in its religious sense but rather as a synonym of hope. Both expressions were followed by action: untiring attempts to cross the border or collect new resources and information, intertwined with short rest in the government centres. This kind of hope does not guarantee anything, but it does suggest that something can still be done (see Zigon 2018: 65). Thus, hoping means to be oriented towards the future and involves waiting, which in its modality can be either passive or inert/active (see Marcel 1967: 280).

However, researchers have realised that people's agency can be found even during seemingly passive waiting or idleness (Hansen 1996; De Vries 2002; Jeffrey 2010). Craig Jeffrey shows that »timepass« in the case of jobless men in India promotes a somewhat inclusive young male culture (2010: 466). Therefore, an abundance of time can be a cultural resource and play a key role in the process of forming a political movement. Perhaps migrants' camping and waiting in precarious conditions along the Greek-Macedonian or Serbian-Hungarian border can constitute a novel form of migrant resistance that subverts migration control (see Hameršak/Pleše 2019: 155), or, at the very least, a displayed rejection of the violent and racist border regime. Furthermore, even longer stays in government centres are not purposeless. Migrants rest, wait out bad weather, collect information or non-food items to trade on the streets of Serbian towns and cities.

Nevertheless, waiting should not be romanticised. As Fontanari (2019) shows, when the available scope of possibilities and the space where migrant subjects act and move drastically shrinks, they might cease to see a future in which they can perceive themselves as active subjects (195). During my fieldwork, I came across migrants who lived in despair; they hid in government facilities, abandoned buildings or tents, unwilling to expose themselves to the public. Sometimes, it was just a temporary state, sometimes longer, maybe even permanent. Their orientation towards the future

could hardly be perceived as active or hope driven. They had the feeling that their life had been broken into pieces and regretted that they had ever started the journey. In these situations, referring to Gabriel Marcel's work (1967), Andreas Bandak and Manpreet K. Janeja claim that when such an internal debate dies out in one's self, we may see despair taking over—despair as the closed and inevitable outcome of a situation which can eventually bring about passivity, subordination, and dependency (2018: 3). Thus, the psychological strain of entrapment between borders can also cause disorientation and undermine self-confidence and motivation, which makes it hard to envisage a happy end to the journey.

In contrast to this, when waiting leaves open what can be anticipated and entails hope, it can be a generator of action (see Bandak/Janeja 2018: 3). In other words, in order to be able to hope, migrants had to move; thus, their hope was expressed by their hyper mobility. It allowed them to endure the imposition of waiting, uncertainty, and hazardous living conditions that were combined with the violence of border guards and pushed them towards border crossings. Migrants hoped to reach their destination country and moved within Serbia from the south to the north, from the north to the south, and in any other direction they thought might be of use.

Research on *Afghan migrants* stranded in Greece has shown that, at the moment of departure, a destination country is usually a pinned down place on their map, but the destination changes as the scope of opportunities shifts during a fragmented journey (Kuschminder 2018). Important factors in changing a decision regarding an intended destination include migrant's changing legal status during a journey, the length of the journey, and the perception of living conditions in the country of residence (Kuschminder 2018). For the protagonists of this paper, the destination country was rather loosely specified. But this imagined destination was nevertheless filled with expectations of having the right to decide about oneself, to have a chance to rent a flat and not be placed in camps under state surveillance. Another common aspiration was work and/or study. For example, Sayad's utmost desire was to finish his secondary education and then obtain a university degree. As scholars have shown, education is perceived as a means to economic development and to reducing poverty (see Jeffrey 2010: 467; Mains 2011: 67). Education is therefore associated with economic success and experiencing progress at an individual level and is a key to entering the middle class (see Mains 2011: 67–68).

Likewise, for Gebre, the opportunity of studying was an important factor since he had abandoned his IT studies due to the death of his father, the main bread-winner. However, Gebre's main priority was a functional and available health system due to an eye infection that was worsening as a consequence of his medical treatment being interrupted by migration. This reasoning was what led him to abandon his asylum

application in Serbia and later in Croatia because the necessity for his surgery was rejected in both places. This pushed him to take measures for a secondary movement to Sweden, where he hoped to receive eye treatment.

Moreover, the expectations of certain destination countries were verified during the course of migrant journeys. During the travel, migrants observed everyday life in the countries they passed through and compared it with their aspirations. An example for this is Gebre, who learned from Serbian and Croatian doctors that he had no chance for getting surgery there because Serbian and Croatian citizens themselves had to wait endlessly for medical treatment. Other migrants realised that their prospects of having a self-sufficient life and completing their education were doomed to fail since even local inhabitants struggled to make ends meet in the Balkan states and emigrated in large numbers to North and Western Europe. Hence, the process of choosing a destination country was often interrelated with the image of this country based on information, rumours and verification of this image on the way. Thus, desires and aspiration are not fixed but rather move as migrants do (see Fontanari 2019: 197).

Hope in Serbia was possible mainly because of the assumption that life would be better further north. Migrants in Serbia were unlikely to find safety and better life conditions there. For them, it was possible to get a short-term respite in the government run temporary facilities, but they did not offer an opportunity to study and work. Thus, they perceived Serbia, but also other poorer EU countries like Bulgaria, Greece, or Croatia, as nothing more than just another country to cross. The migrants' focus was on the future and further movement towards North and Western EU countries. As Abdel, a 20-year-old Moroccan who I met in the Kelebija pre-transit settlement, told me:

> »I am one year on the journey. I am having a shitty life. I must keep going. [...] When I get to Sweden, I will be fine. I will forget about everything. I will try to start another life, new life.«

Migrants saw their stuckedness as something temporary and exceptional imposed on them by the border control regime that would, as is the case with the whole journey, come to an end soon.

The protracted sense of existential and geographical stuckedness in Serbia was challenged by migrant mobility (even if only an imaginative one)—a sense that one is going somewhere (see Hage 2009b: 97). Many of the migrants who I met during my fieldwork had decided to migrate because they had experienced the situation of being stuck. They could not flourish; they could not study or work. Their countries were marred by war, economic injustice, or political terror. They felt that they were deprived of a stable existence, unable to progress in their life. Migration in this case,

as Hage claims, »is either an inability or an unwillingness to endure and ›wait out‹ a crisis of existential mobility« (2009b: 98). A good example for the inability to live in a condition of existential entrapment was Isaias, a 20-year-old Eritrean who had lived as a refugee in Uganda for five years. Isaias described his life in a transit centre as follows: »My mum is just sitting. Sometimes she is working, sometimes she is sitting. In Uganda there is no work.« He had experienced the same situation in Kenya, where he had moved with his uncle.

> »The whole day, I was just sitting. I went there to find some work, you know, to keep going, but I was unsuccessful. I was just sitting; I wanted to start school—it is expensive in Kenya. If you do not have money, you can't do anything.«

The impossibility of gaining education and, by extension, the limited work opportunities block their path to personal independence and developing gender and age-based social norms (see Jeffry 2010: 468). It also creates a space with an overabundance of unstructured time, which is a source of mental distress (see Mains 2011: 44; Jeffrey 2010: 477). The inability to develop, work, or study—in other words to comply with personal and social expectations—were the reasons why Isaias previously returned to Uganda after living in Kenya, where, as he told me, »I was just sitting for six months with my mum.« He then departed to Europe via Turkey. When he described his present situation in Serbia, he again used similar words: »Now, the borders are closed. I can't go further. Now, I am just sitting in the camp.« Isaias added later,

> »If they [the EU] say that the border will remain closed, I will go further [return to Turkey]. I haven't got other options. I can't just sit here any longer. There is no job, there is no pocket money. I can't live here longer. […] I am just sitting here [in the reception centre]. I can't do anything here. But if I get there [to Germany], I can study, I can get education.«

This narrative shows the importance of connecting the available opportunities with matters of the future which taken together translate into a sense of possible existential advancement. If people are unable to make this connection, they will try to move.

Migrants flee violence, terror, poverty, and social injustice, but also try to escape the lack of self-control over their time. In Serbia, they were unable to imagine their desirable future. According to Hage, migrants are »[…] looking for a space and a life where they feel they are going somewhere as opposed to nowhere, or at least, a space where the quality of their ›going-ness‹ is better than what it is in the space they

are leaving behind« (2009b: 98). Their geographical mobility, even if only internal, gave them agency and hope to reach their destination country and possibly realise their goals of social advancement by continuing their professional and personal development, or, at the very least, it gave them hope to attempt to start a normal life: self-sufficient, predictable, and secure.

However, researchers have illustrated that reaching the EU does not end precariousness, exclusion, and movement (Brekke/Brochmann 2013; Picozza 2017; Fontanari 2019). Fontanari shows that hope faded away among her research participants as they were trapped in lengthy unsettled conditions, including homelessness, unemployment, and being forced to move again across borders (see Fontanari 2019: 197–199). Many of her interview partners did not achieve their aspirations and did not have any further place to go.

## Concluding Thoughts: Forced to Move

This article explored the trajectories of single, male travellers through the Balkan route and their reaction to the tightening of the external southeastern EU border. In order to better understand the meaning of high mobility at the bottleneck of entry to the EU, I have contrasted their experiences with research about migrants who have already reached the Schengen Area. I illustrated that the closure of the Balkan corridor, the increase of violence, and the structural and institutional *imposition of waiting*, increase the movement of single, male migrant travellers. Such movement reflects the migrants' hope and agency and offers a chance of social mobility. In other words, as long as migrants' needs, hopes, and aspirations remain unsatisfied and insatiated and as long as there is another place to go, they will keep moving. The hyper mobility on the fringes of the EU brings to mind walking on the spot or turning around in circles (Jansen 2015). These processes become metaphors for blocked expectations on the road to Europe (see Narotzky/Besnier 2014: 11).

Movement gave the migrants in my article hope to escape the stuckedness and eventually reach an idealised Europe, a kind of mythical place that takes time to arrive. However, upon reaching the EU, migrants are often disenchanted with the »welcome« they receive. The strict asylum procedure, the short validity period of documents (Fontanari 2019), the Dublin regulations (Picozza 2017), or simply differences in reception conditions (Brekke/Brochmann 2014) do not allow them to find a new home, but rather forced them to keep on moving. Therefore, movement can be a blessing and a curse for migrants depending on the state of their journey and the expectations they hold.

The high level of geographical movement creates a border control paradox: the more states impose movement-adverse conditions, the more migrants feel they have no choice but to continue moving. Hence, this work confirms Hess' argument that the European border regime does not stop the movements; rather it keeps people »caught in mobility« and transforms border-regions into zones of heightened circulation (see 2012: 436). Furthermore, and importantly, it illustrates that many attempts to »protect« the external EU borders not only unnecessarily risk human lives but also simply do not stop migrant movement. In this sense, they are unproductive; if anything, they seem to create hyper mobile classes that circulate in precarious zones. In fact, the state-imposed legal and physical constraints to curb international migration only temporarily limit the usage of one migratory route in favour of another, more dangerous one, such as the one taking its toll across the Mediterranean Sea.

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## Research Lab

# Authors

**Patricia Artimova** is a PhD student at the University of Ostrava, Czech Republic. In her research she analyzes migration movements and the changing perception of migration in the Balkans, mainly in Serbia. Since 2015, she is an active member of volunteer initiatives operating in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

**Karolína Augustová** is a PhD candidate in Sociology and International Relations at Aston University, researching the displaced people's everyday experiences of border violence along South-Eastern Europe. She is interested in how diverse forms of violence (direct/structural/cultural) affect everyday social processes along borders as well as how the role of intersectionality (masculinity with other locations) plays in violence. In her research, she uses activist ethnography; volunteering in informal refugee camps.

**Selma Banich** is a Zagreb-based artist, social activist, and community organizer. Her artistic and social practice is based on processual, research, and activist work and is politically inspired by anarchism and feminism.

**Barbara Beznec** graduated in Political Science of International Relations at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University in Ljubljana, where she later earned her PhD on the subject of European Citizenship. She is a researcher of migration at the Research Center of the Slovenian Academy of Science and Arts.

**Emina Bužinkić** is a political activist examining the state and police violence against migrants and refugees, particularly concerning issues of border control and violence. Her work extends to understanding the inscriptions of border regimes in the field of schooling by researching the experiences of refugee and migrant students. She is currently obtaining her PhD in critical studies in education and human rights at the University of Minnesota in the United States. She is linked to the Centre for Peace Studies (*Centar za mirovne studije*), the Welcome! Initiative (*Inicijativa Dobrodošli!*), and the Taste of Home (*Okus doma*) in Croatia. Recently she has been

working with the *Transbalkan Solidarity* and *Pirate Care Syllabus Writing Collective*.

**Céline Cantat** is a postdoctoral fellow at Sciences Po with H2020 project MAGYC-Migration Governance and Asylum Crises. Previously, Céline was a Marie-Curie Fellow at CEU, Budapest, studying migration solidarity groups along the Balkan route. She holds a PhD in Refugee Studies from the University of East London and is co-editor of *Refugee Protection and Civil Society in Europe* (Palgrave, 2018) and *Challenging the Political Across Borders: Migrants' and Solidarity Struggle* (CPS Book Series, 2019).

**Andrea Contenta** is an independent researcher and a humanitarian worker. After spending some years between Ethiopia, Kenya, and Sudan focusing on violence, conflicts and displacement, he decided to move to Belgrade following the Balkan corridor. Today he lives and works in Athens.

**Marijana Hameršak** is a senior research associate at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research, Zagreb. Her main areas of research and teaching are migration, children's literature and book history. She is the author of the books *Pričalice* (*Taletellers*, 2011) and *Uvod u dječju književnost* (*Introduction to the Children's Literature*, with Dubravka Zima, 2015), and she has edited several edited collections, with the most recent one, being *Formation and Disintegration of the Balkan Refugee Corridor* (with Emina Bužinkić, 2018).

**Sabine Hess** is professor at the Institute for Cultural Anthropology/European Ethnology, University of Göttingen, since 2011. Her main areas of research and teaching are migration and border regime studies, anthropology of policy with a focus on EU integration and processes of Europeanisation. She is a founding member of the online journal *movements* and of *kritnet* (Network for Critical Border and Migration Studies).

**Azra Hromadžić** is Associate Professor and O'Hanley Faculty Scholar in the Department of Anthropology at Syracuse University. She is the author of *Citizens of an Empty Nation: Youth and State-making in Postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina* (translated into Serbian *Samo Bosne nema: mladi i građenje države u posleratnoj Bosni i Hercegovini*). She also co-edited a volume (with Monika Palmberger), titled *Care Across Distance: Ethnographic Explorations of Aging and Migration*. She is currently working on a new book that investigates riverine citizenship in northwestern Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Civil initiative **Info Kolpa** started in the spring of 2018 as a response to illegal actions of Slovene police, which started systematically denying people the right to seek asylum in Slovenia and pushing people back to Croatia. In the autumn of 2018, we established an informal telephone number for assistance to people wishing to seek asylum in Slovenia. The help we provided proved unsuccessful but with operating the number, we gained a lot of information on practice of push-backs on Slovene-Croatian border, which we presented to Slovene and international public.

**Teodora Jovanović** is as a research assistant at the Institute of Ethnography of SASA and a doctoral student of ethnology and anthropology at University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy. For her doctoral thesis, she conducted an ethnographic fieldwork in reception centers for asylum seekers in Serbia. Previously, she worked in »Miksalište« refugee aid center in Belgrade, and she was involved in »Refugees in Towns« project at Tufts University, Boston, as a local case study researcher.

**Andrej Kurnik** is assistant professor at Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana. He is a member of editorial board of Časopis za kritiko znanosti (Journal for Critique of Sciences).

**Romana Pozniak** is a PhD candidate with working experience in the humanitarian sector and an interest in the area of humanitarianism, biopolitics, refugee studies, and anthropology of labor. Her dissertation explores transformations, practices, and narratives of humanitarian work with migrants/refugees/asylum seekers in post-transitional Croatia. She works at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research in Zagreb.

The **Push-Back Map Collective** is a transnational group of people that come from different fields of radical politics like feminism, anti-capitalism, and anti-racist struggles. Its members are active in documenting and counteracting push-backs and violence at the internal and external(ised) borders of the EU. One main goal of the mapping project is to provide a platform for transnational, non-hierarchical, radical grassroots interventions and exchange.

**Robert Rydzewski** is a PhD candidate at the Department of Anthropology and Ethnology at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, Poland. Formerly, he held a scholarship at the Central European University in Budapest and was a Doctoral Fellow Researcher at the Wirth Institute for Austrian and Central European Studies at University of Alberta in Edmonton in Canada. His scientific interests are migration, civil society, transformations of post-Yugoslav cities. Currently, he is completing his PhD dissertation about the migrant movement in the Serbian part of the Balkan route.

**Jack Sapoch** is an activist affiliated with the NGO No Name Kitchen, where he coordinates the collection of push-back testimonies. In this capacity, he works in the wider Border Violence Monitoring Network—a joint-project organized by independent NGOs—to draw attention to the issue of border violence in the Western Balkans. He received his undergraduate degree from Bates College (USA) where he researched the institutional influences affecting refugee assistance in the ›barracks‹ of Belgrade in 2017.

**Zita Seichter**, **Miriam Neßler** and **Paul Knopf** met each other at Bauhaus-University Weimar in 2017. Today, they are studying Art and Architecture, Urban Studies as well as Human Geography and Regional Development in Weimar, Berlin and Eberswalde. Besides being interested in border regime practices in Belgrade and beyond, they are involved in activist and artistic contexts, researching and teaching on Solidarity Cities, the Right to the City, transformation strategies from a decolonizing perspective as well as art and architecture in the context of the Anthropocene. Related publication: Eckardt, Frank / Neßler, Miriam / Seichter, Zita (Hg.) (2019): Weit weg und unbeachtet. Stadt und Flüchtende in Belgrad seit Schließung der Balkanroute.

**Marc Speer** holds a degree in Sociology and is currently finalizing his PhD thesis on the *Humanitarian Border Regime* at the Institute for Cultural Anthropology/European Ethnology at the University of Göttingen, Germany. In addition he works for the research association bordermonitoring.eu, focusing in particular on the European border regime in South-Eastern Europe.

**Marta Stojić Mitrović** is an ethnologist and anthropologist working at the Institute of Ethnography of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade. In her research, she focuses on discourses and practices related to the topics of migration, citizenship, human rights and discrimination in Serbian, regional, and the EU context.