

# A Volunteer's Diary

## We Did a Better Job in Serbia

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PATRICIA ARTIMOVA

**Abstract:** In 2015, Europe faced significant migration movements heading towards the European Union via the Balkan route. In order to relieve the situation and to support migrants, the groups of so-called independent volunteers, not members of any existing organization, started to travel to the most critical sites. I have been personally involved in volunteering for about four years in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The direct experiences with volunteering in the field are presented as time lapse diary notes, what allowed me to demonstrate the diachronic line of both personal engagement as well as gradual developments in the field.

**Keywords:** Crisis, migration, volunteering, diary, perception

In 2015, Europe faced significant migration movements heading towards the European Union via the Balkan route. In order to relieve the situation and to support migrants, the groups of so-called independent volunteers, not members of any existing organization, started to travel to the most critical sites. At the same time, I graduated in International Relations and Diplomacy with a thesis on human rights and migration. Therefore, my involvement in volunteering in 2015 was partially a result of a professional interest in the ways all actors cooperated and how states managed the situation. On the other hand, as I used to be active in different volunteer positions giving support to others before, personal motivation played an important role in getting involved in the field.

At the time of my decision-making, several initiatives organized donations or travelled to the borders. But there was one organization among the others that became especially popular on social media. The group I volunteered for had already been present in the field for a while and had a more or less functional system of recruiting volunteers, of delivering actual information on developments on the spot as well as on the group's need for new volunteers, the best ways of transport, or on legal and administrative support for volunteers. With such a system in place and with recommendations from friends, contacting the group and planning the trip was easy.

I have been personally involved in volunteering for about four years. The first time, I travelled and volunteered at the Serbian-Croatian border, the Berkasovo - Bapska border crossing, in 2015, and the last stay in Serbia took place in December 2017. The length of my stays varied and depended on actual needs in the field and at centers. As for Bosnia and Herzegovina, I firstly visited Sarajevo in July 2018 and then moved further north, to Bihać, where I stayed for more than a month. Later, I came back a few times, and I volunteered there in December 2018 for the last time.

Such direct experiences with volunteering in the field allowed me to collect research material in its raw form and on a more or less regular basis. The following text is, thus, composed of three types of data: first, personal notes taken as a supporting material for my broader research of the so-called migration crisis; second, diary notes other volunteers made available for me as discussing and sharing personal and moral issues related to migration was, from my point of view, common, but depended on relations and increased during the time spent together in the field; and third, partial transcriptions of interviews with co-volunteers based on the initial purpose to prepare academic papers on the motivation of volunteers that were not published in the end. As most of the original data was already in a diary form, the processing only required small corrections, e.g. contextual information on places or events. Also, time lapse diary notes allowed me to demonstrate the diachronic line of volunteers' personal engagement and gradual developments in the field.

The following text is a collage based on these diverse materials put together and rearranged in order to present the complexity of the topic. The paper shows factors of various impacts on volunteers and their work in the field, reaching from very personal issues to the management of the situation by states. The importance of the factors is then compared to time periods and different places.

The opinions mentioned in the text do not represent official statements of the volunteers' initiative. Furthermore, names of volunteers, migrants, employees, and organizations have been erased to ensure the anonymity of respondents.

## **SERBIA: OCTOBER 2015-MARCH 2016**

### **15.10.2015, Berkasovo-Bapska**

Well, I am here. Our co-volunteer kept preparing us for the field during the whole ride to Serbia. But the reality surprised me anyway. First of all, that awful smell in the air, then, thousands of people actually waiting to cross the border, the lack of the big organizations' presence on the spot, and, finally, a feeling of great confidence

of migrants towards volunteers. My first contact with a refugee was when a poorly dressed lady put her newborn into my arms because she saw I wore a sign of volunteers, and she went away to rest a bit. I just stood there and had no words. I didn't expect this at all.

### **17.10.2015, Berkasovo-Bapska**

Nights are always worse. It is really cold. Nobody can actually sleep. Kids are hungry and frozen. It feels as though other organizations are not present on the spot. The only thing we can offer to those people is the sweetest tea on earth and efforts to moderate communication with police on both sides of the borders. It really beats me when I see police separating families from their kids.

### **19.10.2015, Berkasovo-Bapska**

The situation here is truly awful. Watching what is actually happening here is something that I just can't note down properly. I have an education in humanitarian aid, but I still don't get what is going on. On the other hand, there are also beautiful moments in this hell. I admire co-volunteers who have refugee experience, and now they are here. Or yesterday, a group of refugees and volunteers sang some known songs the whole night. I loved when they chose »Don't stop me now« by Queen. What a bitter coincidence.

### **25.10.2015, Berkasovo-Bapska**

The second day with closed borders. Nobody knows what is going to happen. Migrants are accumulating on the Serbian side, and everybody is starting to be pretty nervous. From time to time, the Serbian or Croatian police close the borders on purpose for a few hours. But now it just lasts too long. And also the weather is supposed to worsen these days.

### **26.10.2015, Berkasovo-Bapska**

As presumed, a few people didn't hold their nerves, and it ended with a fight. A few migrants, including kids, were hurt. Fortunately, Croatia opened the borders again. And all migrants are thanking us. We actually did nothing special.

### **28.10.2015, Šid**

I am definitely starting to make a list of people who don't want to be in touch with me on social networks. One picture of me volunteering in Serbia is surprisingly enough to call me a »traitor of traditional values« and stop talking to me.

### **29.10.2015, Berkasovo-Bapska**

I woke up at 4:00 am because of the coldness. As I heard some noise, I decided to check what was going on. It was the classic night shift story: all of the main humanitarian organizations left the spot, migrants started to accumulate here, and one lady almost delivered. Although, they didn't want to allow her to cross the border at the beginning, we managed to transfer the lady to the closest hospital situated in Croatia.

### **10.12.2015, Šid**

Finally, migrants stopped being sent directly to the border. Instead of that, the buses stop at a former hostel on a highway to Zagreb next to the border to Croatia. Migrants have at least some time to rest, and we can provide them with few things they need. Work is divided among the state institutions, main humanitarian organizations, and volunteer initiatives, and we must accept it.

### **14.01.2016, Adaševci**

Our coordinator warned us not to cooperate with local employees working for state institutions because, from his point of view, they are using the situation of migrants for their own profit. But, my co-volunteer came with a better field strategy than arguing over the best crisis management. If we manage to make some tea or coffee, she always goes and offers it to them. The shift is much less problematic then.

### **05.02.2016, Šid**

We had a nice talk about breakups in the evening. We found out that almost every one of the volunteers here either broke up with their partners because of their direct involvement in volunteering or at least know somebody who did.

### **07.02.2016, Šid**

So, I spent last night on a shift and then cleaned our volunteers' house. The shift was as usual: really cold, a lot of migrants, nervous bus drivers and local employees, and everybody in a great hurry. »Is there anybody in need of some boots, hats, gloves, hygienic products, or diapers?« And the cleaning was, well, cleaning. I don't get those people pretending to be volunteers saving the world and not being able to wash the dishes.

### **10.02.2016, Adaševci**

Today's night shift was a bit different. Few families came and stayed in the rub hall during the whole night, and we were supposed to watch if everything was going well. My foreign co-volunteer refused to stay there because the atmosphere and inside look of the tent for him recalled a concentration camp. So, I stayed with another volunteer. Migrants were calm and everything was going smoothly. But later, my colleague started to behave strangely. Later today, we found out he has some psychological issues. Obviously, he somehow forgot to inform anybody. What a responsible attitude.

### **20.03.2016, Šid**

EU-Turkey migration deal: since the deal, the crossing has been significantly restricted for migrants. As a result, migrants and refugees have said to accumulate in several places in Serbia, and new centers have been opened. Since then, volunteers have been active as a part of those officially established camps.

## **SERBIA: NOVEMBER 2016-JANUARY 2018**

### **10.11.2016, Šid**

One of my best friends told me he had no understanding for my work with »economic migrants pretending to be refugees«. In two days he leaves for the United Kingdom to work there...

### **12.11.2016, Adaševci**

We spent another night shift only by talking with migrants and with almost no sleep. Hearing all those stories make me feel a bit sick. Those people escaped from a war, they lost family members, and they are on their way for years... And we still think they don't deserve to come.

### **18.11.2016, Principovac**

Thanks to our way of funding, we are able to ensure things migrants are lacking and other NGOs can't buy: for example, all kinds of hygienic products for more than 500 migrants. Yes, there are toilets; however nobody distributes the toilet paper. We do.

### **11.02.2017, Principovac**

During the hygienic products distribution, we had more time to talk with migrants: those who knew English came and shared some of their stories. Suddenly, one of them showed me his scars of a gunshot wound. I had no words for it.

### **15.03.2017, Šid**

One of our volunteers found out that an anti-Islamic group added me on their list of persons supporting terrorism and Islamization of Europe. At least I am not alone there. It is a truly long list.

### **17.03.2017, Adaševci**

We ran out of powder in the laundry room again. When trying to get the new one, we struggled to find anybody who knew something about it. So, we waited and tried to calm down angry migrant women that had waited for their laundry time for a week. I must admit, after such a long time here, I am pretty resistant to their excuses or reproaches. However, their stories are truly sorrowful sometimes. Today, a lady from Afghanistan explained her sad experience with a typical use of refugee language: »Me five bibi, husband Daesh, mushkila, mushkila [...]« and so »I have five kids and my husband was killed by the Islamic state, it's a big problem [...].«

### **19.03.2017, Šid**

After four months, I am back in the field. So, I started with an update on information and changes since my last stay here. Good news—there are no more lice here. Bad news—night shifts are still on, and I start tomorrow. Everything else has stayed the same.

### **10.04.2017, Principovac**

Yesterday's night shift was just nonsense. Everything went smoothly until somebody called us to help one guy. We only knew he had drunk a bit of alcohol, and then he started to have problems with breathing. After a while, my co-volunteer stayed with him, and I decided to call an ambulance. The official employee was nice and gave me his cell to call the paramedics.

When they found out he was a migrant who needed their help, they ignored everything. Just looked at him, and, because he had drunk some spirits, they refused to help him. Also, they informed us not to call them again. We stayed with that migrant all night. In the morning, we informed a doctor who came to the center. She asked about the medicine the paramedics had given him. And she was quite surprised by their behavior.

Later today, we found out he drank because he had been informed of his mother's and sister's deaths in Afghanistan. Doctors in the camp then cared about him because of his bad mental and health conditions. . .

### **20.04.2017, Šid**

I just don't get why people think migrants form a homogenous group of Muslims ignoring others. No refugee ever questioned my religion. If somebody does it, it's always some colleagues surprisingly asking, »And you really are Catholic?«.

### **25.04.2017, Šid**

I hate this kind of management. Our coordinators have so many ideas, but no real thought on their realization. So, it is usually me who must finish their job and watch their commitments.

### **06.05.2017, Adaševci**

Ah, lovely day again. We were a bit late, and it meant migrants were waiting for us with their laundry and started to be nervous. The washing machines were immediately full, and I had no idea whose laundry was there. Within five minutes, another migrant came claiming she had to go to a doctor with her baby. Of course everybody is sick when there is a laundry day...But later she came with a real paper from a doctor confirming her story. I really need some rest to become human again.

### **09.06.2017, Šid**

Today, I again received a few hateful messages. I really think I am getting used to the fact that some people would like to »cut me to pieces« or »beat me and my family« only because of my field work.

### **12.07.2017, Adaševci**

In closer cooperation with the center management, we started to organize the movie nights. Sometimes it is pretty difficult to agree on a movie that is not offensive to any nationality; but migrants appreciate it. Especially kids. And we also prefer them watching movies and not playing on a highway...

### **03.08.2017, Principovac**

When we came to a camp today for the distribution, a few migrants ran to us shouting: »Big problem my friend, big problem!« Expecting a new casualty, theft, fight, or something else, we asked what had happened. They explained they had played and kicked all soccer balls to the other side of the border, to Croatia. And then, the Croatian police weren't willing to give them back to them. After bursting out in laughter, we promised to buy some new balls for them. Tough life in a refugee camp.

### **20.11.2017, Šid**

While buying homemade *ajvar* at the market, we again had to explain what we are doing here. It is always the same. After the »where are you from?« and »what are you doing here?«, an about twenty-minute-long monologue about the local situation starts. And it usually ends with »the European Union does nothing« or »they (migrants) are ruining our town. I don't want to help them anymore«.



**23.11.2017, Šid**

A migrant girl was hit by a train while trying to cross the border with her family. We knew them. And we also know such things as suicide attempts or abuses that happen here as well. We are just not prepared to solve this kind of situation, neither officially nor at the internal level of our movement.

**27.11.2017, Adaševci**

As we achieved all our goals in the field, we decided to leave Serbia and cede our activities to local volunteers and employees. Fortunately, they don't need our constant help anymore.

**14.12.2017, Šid**

My last day in a field. After three years of traveling to Serbia, I must admit, I look forward to rest a bit. The work we did here in cooperation with other organizations and local employees is so visible: it reaches from chaos at the border crossing in the middle of a field to well organized centers for migrants with all services. Good job, volunteers.

**03.01.2018, Šid**

Our mission in Serbia has officially ended, but not completely. Thanks to our good cooperation in the field, we agreed on ongoing mutual support. And who knows, maybe we will come back one day...

**BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA: JULY 2018–DECEMBER 2018**

**06.07.2018, Sarajevo**

First day in the Bosnian field. Not surprisingly, there are a lot of migrants, shelters in very poor conditions, few actors that seem to be doing everything and nothing, no relevant information, and omnipresent chaos. So, it seems to be a good place for us.

### **08.07.2018, Bihać**

After the first days, I started to work with locals in a field kitchen. It is a lot of work, but I enjoy it. People here are perfect. They need help, they appreciate it and don't mind my humble knowledge of the Bosnian language that much. On the other hand, their boss is still not quite sure if I am allowed to work there. So, until he finds out, I will stay here and do my job.

### **10.07.2018, Bihać**

During the food distribution today, I met two families that I know from the Serbian centers. They remember me too. I am happy they have moved on their way but, on the other hand, conditions here are much worse for migrants with kids.

### **11.07.2018, Bihać**

A new volunteer came yesterday, but he was not allowed to work with us. They said to come in the afternoon so they have time to prepare his registration or something. But it's his second day here and nothing has really happened. We will try again tomorrow.

### **20.07.2018, Bihać**

Today, I met a researcher from some Bosnian city living abroad. She came back to see what is going on and to help. But while talking to her, she always compared the current situation with her own war experience. It was really interesting to hear her story, on the one hand. But on the other, I am not sure if her visit helps her or migrants somehow.

### **23.07.2018, Bihać**

I had my first free day! Perfect! I went for a walk and then worked on a field plan for our organization. As I found out, my coordinator thinks our volunteers should do more important jobs because we are much more experienced, thanks to our previous mission in Serbia. I agree with experience, but we are not really allowed to do more than what we keep doing now. And actually, I don't mind because I can really see that my local co-workers need my help. So, according to the needs and possibilities of the field, I don't think there is much room for a personal or organizational fight for better statuses.

### **25.07.2018, Bihać**

We have been here only for a month, and we are all already tired of this chaotic system with a lack of information. We are in the middle of the decisions of official actors and governmental institutions. Trying and doing something until a competent person comes and informs us that what we do is not forbidden, but it is also not recommended to continue our activities. So, we change our activities to improve hygienic conditions here, assisting the distribution of food or the opening of new camps, and the way we have responsibility for the quarantine. But our activities are dependent on the agreement of all the competent actors here who change their decision almost every day.

### **03.08.2018, Bihać**

Our article on the situation here has finally been published. I must admit, for now, I am quite surprised only one person wishes me to »drop dead«. The rest thinks I am only stupid. I can live with that.

### **05.08.2018, Ostrožac**

The center for so-called vulnerable migrants was opened today. We spent the whole day assisting, and waiting, and improvising. No matter how many organizational meetings we have, things always go different here, and we never have enough plans for all possible situations [. . .]. Nevertheless, a few migrant families finally have a bit better place to stay. But at the end of a day, those kids are just being moved from one camp to another and from one country to a new one. However, they seem to be more used to such transfers than their parents.

### **18.08.2018, Velika Kladuša**

The number of casualties occurring during push-backs from Croatia is increasing. From time to time, also kids and women are injured. And now, it is difficult to provide them with appropriate medical help. Doctors are not always willing to provide them with treatment because of unclear payment for a medical intervention, ambulances refuse to come, and transporting people to hospitals by car might be considered as aiding illegal migration. Fortunately, with common local support, we managed to help those in really bad shape. However, it just can't go on like this.

### **02.09.2018, Bihać**

Everything went wrong today. We were denied access to a camp where we were supposed to work today. And we didn't get any information on the reasons for this or if we could work there tomorrow. Everybody is just exhausted of this lack of relevant information. And after months here, we still have no clue on who is responsible for decision-making.

### **18.09.2018, Bihać**

Okay, so, one of the main humanitarian organizations was officially refused to work in a field today; just because somebody said so. Excuses are being said, but who knows where the truth lies. We all are angry because there is no adequate replacement for them.

### **29.09.2018, Bihać**

I came back after some time. My former co-workers welcomed me as if I had never left. It was nice. I feel here as if I was at home. On the other hand, other things haven't actually changed. Only the number of incoming migrants is higher. And a new center has been opened. But the rest is the same.

### **03.10.2018, Bihać**

My friend messaged me today asking why I still worked with migrants and when I planned to stop making a fool of myself. I ignored it. Once I am in a field, I really don't have energy to reply to this kind of messages.

### **15.10.2018, Bihać**

At the end of a day, one local lady who was watching us collecting and sorting donations came to us and asked how she could help us and migrants. This kind of local support is really a heartening experience.

### **28.10.2018, Bihać**

On 28 October 2015, I was in Berkasovo. I was freezing, hungry, ankle deep in mud, working all days and all nights, arguing with policemen on both sides of the border.

Now, three years later, I am in Bosnia and have just met my favorite Afghani migrant family that spent more than one year in the Serbian center (»Me five bibi, [...]«). They came here yesterday and stayed on the street during the night. Sometimes, I just have no idea what ›management of migration‹ means. I still struggle to react neutrally when I meet more and more faces from Serbia. . .

### **07.11.2018, Ključ**

As our supplies of donated clothes and material were huge, we decided to help our friends in another town that became a new critical spot. There is no camp, no place for migrants to stay under a roof, and they are being forced to stay under the sky in no matter what weather conditions.

### **10.11.2018, Bihać**

It took months until we managed to meet with other groups and actors and actually work together to improve the situation. I still don't get what the motivation is for some people doing fieldwork when they refuse cooperation with others. We face the same problems after all. . .

### **20.11.2018, Bihać**

Winter is coming, and we still struggle to coordinate the donations. The supplies of the humanitarian aid came today. What a chaos! Again, nobody knew what was going to happen. We spent the whole day trying to get any information on where to park a truck or where to put down the shipment. And our volunteers spent days in a camp supervising the quarantine. When we came there in the evening to bring them more supplies of cloth, we found out that somebody had just dispersed it. It sounds reasonable, scabies and lice are obviously not that big of a problem in a camp of 1,000 people when they don't have beds for everybody. . .

### **20.12.2018, Bihać**

After hard work in the field and efforts to stay present and help here, we as well as a few other international volunteers were told to leave the country or change our plans significantly. With the experience we had from Serbia, it was really sorrowful to accept this message. But in the end, it is still better to leave with as many good relations with everybody as possible. Who knows, maybe we will meet again. But

for now, comparing what we managed to do in the same time during our previous mission, we must admit, we did a better job in Serbia.

*The author would like to thank volunteers and colleagues for sharing their precious experience and opinion. The author would also like to show gratitude to all volunteers and employees of the organizations and institutions active in the field for their cooperation and work that aimed to help migrants and relieve the situation in the most critical spots on the Balkan migration route since 2015.*

## Contents

---

The Forging of the Balkan Route. Contextualizing the Border Regime in the EU Periphery <i>Marijana Hameršak, Sabine Hess, Marc Speer, Marta Stojić Mitrović</i>	9
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### Articles

Old Routes, New Perspectives. A Postcolonial Reading of the Balkan Route <i>Barbara Beznec, Andrej Kurnik</i>	33
Affective Labor within the Local Humanitarian Workscape <i>Romana Pozniak</i>	55
Hope, Waiting, and Mobility. Migrant Movement in Serbia After The EU-Turkey Deal <i>Robert Rydzewski</i>	75
The Rise and Fall of Migration Solidarity in Belgrade <i>Céline Cantat</i>	97
Transformations of Humanitarian Aid and Response Modes to Migration Movements. A Case Study of the Miksalište Center in Belgrade <i>Teodora Jovanović</i>	125

## **Artistic Contribution**

- The Shining. From an Anonymous Wall to Madina Hussiny Square  
*Selma Banich* 151

## **Essays**

- Notes from the Field.  
»Migrant Crisis« in Bihać, Bosnia and Herzegovina  
*Azra Hromadžić* 163
- A Volunteer's Diary. We Did a Better Job in Serbia  
*Patricia Artimova* 181

## **Interview**

- The Push-Back Map. Mapping Border Violence in Europe and Beyond.  
A Collective Self-Reflection  
*Push-Back Map Collective* 197

## **Artistic Contribution**

- Mapping In-Betweenness.  
The Refugee District in Belgrade in the Context of Migration,  
Urban Development, and Border Regimes  
*Cosima Zita Seichter, Miriam Neßler, Paul Knopf* 207



## **Interventions**

Border Violence as Border Deterrence.  
Condensed Analysis of Violent Push-Backs from the Ground  
*Karolína Augustová, Jack Sapoch* 219

Report on Illegal Practices of Collective Expulsion  
at the Slovenian-Croatian Border and Struggles Against It  
*Info Kolpa* 233

## **Research Lab**

From Corridor to Encampment.  
Mapping EU Strategies of Containment in Serbia  
*Andrea Contenta* 245

Deported Man, Secured State. A Long Trajectory of a Deportation  
*Emina Bužinkić* 279

Authors 287

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**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 »Miksal-ište« 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.*

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