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RACIAL CAPITALISM, DIGITALITIES AND ACTIVISM AT THE BORDERS

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RACIAL CAPITALISM, DIGITALITIES AND ACTIVISM AT THE BORDERS
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Abstract

This thesis explores the material practices along the routes and borders of 'external EUrope' (Serbia, Bosnia and beyond), using Racial Capitalism as a framework to interrogate the political economies (PE) that sustain illegalised mobility. There is limited scholarship that engages with human smuggling economies as an outgrowth of racialised capital and labour.

The thesis is guided with a multi-sited research design — blending 9-months of traditional and digital ethnography. Fieldwork was conducted in multiple locations situated in two areas, next to the Schengen zone in Serbia and Bosnia respectively, supplemented by a mix of semi-structured and informal interviews, with people on the move, 'border workers' (people working in illegalised border crossings) and international activists. The research design is strengthened with a digital dimension, providing the thesis with visual analysis on the ways in which routes and borders are communicated.

Departing from solely criminological frameworks that dominate public and academic discourse on human smuggling, the first findings suggest illicit 'transit' economies are productive for border regimes and cannot be isolated from European capital. Concepts such as 'relative surplus populations' guides our thinking about the 'survival economies' that exist along the so-called Balkan route. Existing literature is limited when thinking about labour, securitisation expenditure and governance.

The second findings take a cultural turn to examine the sub-cultural scripts of the borderland. Migrant youth perform (and act out) intra- and inter-communal solidarity and conflict published into digital productions. With sensational style, their mediated and choreographed repertoires of work and life at the border is explored. Working Crews re-arrange the sterile materiality of borders into drama-narratives crafting collective identities tied to their labour, place and (im)mobility.

The third findings explores how grassroots organisations are entangled in the criminal(ized) spaces at the borders. Contradictory dynamics of political solidarity perform positionalities to mitigate the messy pragmatics of labour and border violence(s). In this fraught co-presence, socio-political imaginaries emerge and sever, reshaping how grassroots actors engage with and contest the structures of the political economies at the border.

Overall, the thesis repositions borderwork within a broader political economy of EUrope. Migrant border workers are framed as labour made productive along routes and borders. Additionally, the labour is turned into cultural productions, reinterpreting everyday bordering into subcultural digitalities. Lastly grassroots actors find their practices of solidarity and care blunted by the commodification of social relations, by the socialities produced from shadow economies along the route.

Chapter 1 Introduction

It is the 23rd February 2024, I am scouting at the bus station, looking for people that may have been push backed from the Croatian border in need of food, clothes, blankets or basic medical. I am with an activist group that I have built relations with for the last four years, and its my second time in the town of Bihać, a known stopping point for people moving further north west into ‘Schengen land’¹. Every evening we take orders from the regulars that hang out outside the coach station every night. The town functions as a temporary “safe haven,” yet this sense of refuge becomes psychologically untenable when prolonged stays — sometimes lasting several months — partly imposed by the Croatian border police’s systematic use of violence during illegal pushbacks. The violence is mostly conducting on the bodies of migrants too poor to pay for the ‘luxury’ of a smuggling service that can bypass the more explicit forms of state violence.

As we’re leaving to go home, two guys are walking behind us with purpose, on the road opposite the bus departures terminal. They introduce themselves as we walk towards the main road bridge that crosses the turquoise coloured river Una. One of the guys (early 20s) is Arif² from Raqqa. He tells me how he arrived yesterday from Serbia. He exclaims, in a sigh of relief, to have avoided the ‘mafia’ on the way:

“Serbia is full of mafia...Syrian, Moroccan, Afghan, Kosovoan, Serbian, Albanian!... All in Serbia!...too many mafia!...i avoid...i go other way!”.

¹ Schengen-land — officially known as the Schengen Area first established in 1985 Luxembourg

² All the names included in this chapter are pseudonyms to protect their identity

Not only was the ‘mafia’ a problem for Arif, he stresses how high the stakes are crossing Serbia at the time, “they [the Serbian police] take you to prison, if the police catch you, so I come here [Bosnia]”.

As we are getting closer to the bridge, what seemed to be Arif’s travel partner was talking to the other activists. I later find out his name is Sami, from Algeria, and is barely in his mid-20s. He tries his charm³ with Maria, one of the international activists whom was volunteering across the Balkan route that autumn and winter⁴. Sami’s flirtatious disposition⁵, and general self assurance, my feelings led me to believe he was not new to the ‘world’ of routes and borders. Often you would see young men and boys looking lost and exhausted, I had developed a sixth sense⁶ to whom ‘lived the borders’ and those who were merely passing through the borders. Sami came across as the former, although his bravado quickly turned into a plead for a new pair of trainers and a new set of clothes.

I couldn’t help noticing the clothes he was wearing, they reminded me of a similar dress code to the border workers that lived and worked the borderlands in the north of Serbia, where I had previously conducted fieldwork in the Spring and Summer months (2023). The clothes the organisation did have in stock would have turned Sami’s sportswear branded style into a drab version of an East London hipster.

³ ‘the charm’ —part of the everyday practices of solidarity and care are underpinned by emotions and sexuality in the bodily performance. This is part and parcel of life and it doesn’t magically disappear in the bordered life worlds of people on the move.

⁴ Maria was the most adept volunteer I met that year. She was street-wise when it came to everyday interaction with those experienced in life along the route. Moreover her occupation as a social worker in Italy, meant she understood what lie ahead (in Italy) for the young men and adolescences she met along the route.

⁵ In moments of need and survival people revert to their sexuality as a way of bargaining. Quite the opposite to the curated imagery in promotion campaigns from the humanitarian sector.

⁶ over time you develop an understanding of people’s situated position, the social and cultural capital an almost street-wise mentality and knowledge of the border regime (from below)

Despite my skepticism as to Sami's sincerity, he reiterated how he was going to cross into Croatia that night; he explains candidly how he had ran out of funds. I still couldn't shake off the feeling that Sami did not need the trainers. He appeared too 'wise' thus playing on our (activists) solidaristic sensibilities. His advanced command of the English language and the manner in which he held himself exuded confidence, which automatically led me into a whole host of assumptions, and I reverted into a defence mode, questioning his potential 'position(ality)' in Bihać. I was skeptical of how much he really needed our support. He explains he had fell on hard times and professes that he didn't come from a rich family, nor poor, but 'my family do not support me [while travelling across the route].'

A few days later, me and the team see Sami again, this time I mention to him I was in Subotica last summer. His confident and cheeky demeanour, changed instantly, into a serious and stiff posture, Sami shifts his eyes to his extreme left and right, and leans his head closer to me slightly, as if someone may be listening to our conversation. He then breaks into the story of how he ended up in Horgoš, Serbia. He finds it in himself to tell me what he was doing there; his role en-route and the opportunities to work whilst moving across this section of the route.

To move across northern Serbia before the counter-smuggling operation (October 27th, 2023) required pretty much everyone to be with a 'smuggling crew'. With the blessing of the Serbian state apparatus, some of these crews controlled the border territories leading to Hungary. Sami was one of several (mainly) young guys I met⁷ working in the spaces considered smuggling 'territory'. The regime became extremely expensive and everything became more commodified; many types of services for a price, led to more complex set of labour relations and multiplications of different roles in the 'smuggling economy'.

⁷ whilst delivering aid to passengers that could not afford some of the services smugglers offered

Sami found himself in a predicament, without funds coming from home he was not able to cross the stretch of territory controlled by the crews. Sami tells me he was actively working in a Moroccan-Tunisian-led crew, when he was given the chance to work for one of the two dominant Afghan-led crews. It was reported in the local press in late 2022 the Moroccan crew were dismantled by the Serbian police⁸. The core of the crews tend to be tight, sometimes relations and from the same village or neighbouring village, but it was not uncommon for people to work for crews that were predominantly from other parts of the world and with very different heritage and background.

They gave him 'work' in a number of roles, "I would take people to the border and receive people on the other side [Hungarian side], I also worked as security". I naively ask him, "what exactly entailed security?" He explains,

"when one group sees the other taking much more money than him, each group out for themselves...they attack the other group...to make it more balanced...100s of thousands of euros a night."

Inter and intra-group violence was an almost nightly occurrence in the northern areas next to Orban's fence during my time there and according to reports dating from July 2022⁹. The working conditions, the amounts of money and people moving across these locations made these spaces highly contentious for smugglers to control and protect. Sami leans into me again, and with a dampened voice, starts to tell me about his last days in Horgoš. On

⁸ it was widely reported this police intervention was further backed by the Serbian state's own decision to suspend visa free travel from Morocco and Tunisia after political pressure from Bruxelles (circa Nov 2022)

⁹ This date stands out in the interviews from two key actors that monitored the northern territories of Serbia at the time (more on this in chapter 4)

the night of the shoot-out he was on location as ‘security’ for the crew. He does not hesitate in telling me how he opened fire on a rival crew that night¹⁰:

“I fought back for my life, not theirs (Afghan crew), I would have been killed [by the rivals] if I didn’t fight back”

He remembers the number of weapons the group he was fighting with ‘dug up’ that night... as he recollects, his eyes widen and looks straight into mine, giving me the impression without words the quantity of weaponry that was stored there, “We were shooting for 9 hours without stopping...until we ran out of ammunition”.

The ordeal did not end there for Sami. In the early morning hours the Serbian authorities decided what would later be described by the media and Interior ministry as a ‘counter-smuggling’ operation that lasted for weeks. This would not be the first time anti-terrorist and gendarmerie units were deployed by the central government in 2023¹¹. Sami decides to run into the woodlands where he ends up hiding for ten days while the state’s counter-operations were intensifying. He tells me, the ‘commandos’¹² were circling the area but found refuge near Martonoš village. With a wad of cash in his pocket and the clothes on his back, Sami tells me how lucky he was that an old man from the nearest village was out walking his dog in the woodland and found where Sami was hiding. He remembers, whipping out some notes and hands the old man 100 euros for his silence and service. The local returned everyday with food from the village shop — “cans of coke, crisps and

¹⁰ 27th October 2023

¹¹ It was almost normalised by all that interacted in the border regime that Gendarmerie units were part of the daily rhythms of bordered existence in the spring and summer of 2023. See here. <https://borderviolence.eu/app/uploads/IV-report-Serbia-Document-A4.pdf>

¹² the name given by border workers and migrants to refer to special police units (esp. gendarmerie). Afghan crew would also call fellow members ‘commando’.

chocolate”, buying Sami ten days near the Tisa river in the cold autumn weather, before deciding to leave; “I couldn’t live in the ‘jungle’¹³ forever!”

In preparation to try and blend in with the local Subotician population, Sami cleans himself in the bitter cold Tisa river. He even finds a moment to enter a shop to buy new clothes to ‘blend in with the public’, but this didn’t work. Sami was arrested in central Subotica and taken to the local police station for questioning.

In the period following the counter-smuggling operation, anyone fitting the description of ‘migrant’ was being picked up in Vojvodina and arrested, served with police orders and asked to pay a fine or to serve mandatory jail time for not being in a government facility. I reflect when every time I was taking the coach between the 9th November and until late December, police routinely checked all the passengers on the coach fitting the description of ‘migrant’. Essentially the local police force created a state of exception for racialised subjects whether you had the correct documents or not. I was never asked, assumed to be a Serbian national.

After being arrested he was taken to the ‘Subotica prison’ — thrown in a cell with other men from different countries, he lists: Afghanistan, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco. He explains how he was in ‘prison’ for 20 days, where he was subjected to the electricity taser, and how being under custody of the Subotician police force was, “worse than Guantanamo!!”. Sami gesticulates to me his innocence, the part he played in the smuggling group, “I am not a big mafia guy, I was just doing a job.”

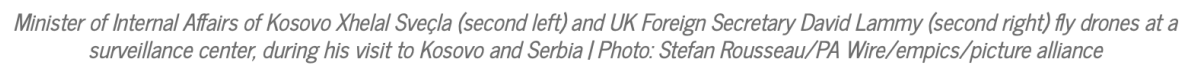
¹³ Jungle — is referred to by people on the move as wooded areas

At the police station, all the people suspected of being involved were slammed into a prison cell and made to eat pork¹⁴, regularly beaten and received verbal threats, especially if the arrested showed 'pride in being Muslim, or resist in some way' Sami recalls. I would later hear similar stories from other men that were active in Serbia, and others that had spent time in Bulgarian transit camps and detention facilities. In the cell, him and his cellmates were kept in squalid conditions, the arrested were made to defecate in a hole in the ground inside the cell, "in front of everyone..we would look away."

Roughly a year later from meeting Sami, and roughly 1 year and three months from when Sami was arrested, the British Labour Party are less than a year into their term after winning a landslide majority in July 2024. The newly elected Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland, Sir Keir Starmer makes one of his central policy pledges to tackle irregular boat crossings containing migrant populations seeking refuge in the United Kingdom.

One part of Starmer's approach to tackling 'the small boats crisis' was by sending his Foreign Secretary, David Lammy to sign bi-lateral agreements and hold press conferences and releases press packs with the western Balkan states (Serbia and Kosovo) and Albania. Following the trip, the UK foreign office publishes a press releases from the UK government's own website focussing their attention on 'smashing the gangs at the heart of the irregular migration crisis, and to 'strengthen cooperation on tackling irregular migration and serious organized crime', making 'quicker removals to Serbia and initiatives designed to "protect the UK's borders and communities." Accompanying the press release, David Lammy (foreign Secretary) is pictured meeting his counterparts in the alleged countries where 'the gangs' are active: Kosovo, Albania and Serbia.

¹⁴ pig is haram



anthropologist Bettaieb (2022) writes in the blog post titled, ‘From Tataouin to Serbia. State of Al-Kazawi’¹⁵, under the pen name ‘Muhammad is Good’:

“On the border between Serbia and Hungary, a large number of smugglers of various nationalities are spread; Afghans, Iraqis, Moroccans and others, but the most famous of all and the most notorious is Al-Kazawi, he is a Moroccan smuggler from Casablanca as his nickname shows. Immigrants describe Al-Kazawi as a ‘state’. Dozens of people work under it.”

For the purposes of this study what is interesting is how Bettaieb’s links smuggling culture to the political economy of bordering. The anthropologist cites the entanglement of imperial wars and destabilisation on the Tunisian border with Libya and to the present moment in Serbia (at the time of Battaieb writing in 2022-23). Through these narratives of economic struggle and mobility for ‘Tataoiuns’, an identity is born through the smuggler’s labour; a source of pride in the border region of Tunisia. This is reflected in the smuggler’s sensibility to style in their video content, with various Facebook posts and TikTok channels of smuggler profiles in Serbia and Bosnia; young men posing in front of the camera — the aesthetics of a ‘working crew’¹⁶ daubed with crew numbers and migrants thanking ‘Kazawi’ for his services and successful journey. The names in the videos have made their way into the discourses of the UK’s Foreign office press releases.

The names Tataouine and Kazawi are on the tip of migrant youth tongues as ‘mafia’ and as heroes, they are introduced into the wider debate as ‘most wanted’ criminals, the head of

¹⁵ <https://khatt30.com/الكزاوي/> Published Jan 2022

¹⁶ Self-proclaimed, and used by activists to avoid the politically toxic, and inaccurate use of the term ‘smuggler’

the snake, or what the recent BBC undercover documentary titled, ‘To Catch a Scorpion’, feeds into the imagination of a predator that must be caught by a media intent on doing the work of the state. This is not exclusive to the British government, European agencies, member states, non-EU states, technocrats, private sector security contractors and Think Tanks have all been getting in on the latest bogie men of mobility — the declaration for the ‘war on people smuggling’ has already begun.

At the ‘Global Alliance to counter migrant smuggling’ on the 28th November 2023, Ursula von der Leyen is billed as the keynote speaker. In the audience that day was the commissioner of Justice, Commissioner for the Neighbourhood and Enlargement Olivier Várhelyi, and the commissioner for International partnerships, Jutta Urpilainen, with 26 countries sending interior and foreign affairs ministers to the conference¹⁷. At the top of her speech, the commissioner evokes the all too familiar imagery of the victim-predator, which has come to be associated as a default social relation to describe borders crossings facilitated by non-state actors not endorsed or procured by the state:

“We have heard the stories of victims of migrant smugglers. We have heard the stories of smugglers who got rich on the back of their victims...whether we represent countries of origin, transit or destination for migrants, we all share the same desire. We are here to fight this criminal business, to stop this unspeakable suffering. We are here to build a Global Alliance against the smuggling of human beings.”

The speech delivered to the EU, African, Asian and Eastern European representatives was not so much a declaration but a continuation of a ‘war’ that has been simmering in the background for a number of years. Chris Horwood (2022), Senior researcher at the Mixed

¹⁷ https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/keynote-speech-president-von-der-leyen-international-conference-global-alliance-counter-smuggling-2023-11-28_en

Migration Policy Think Tank has conducted extensive research over several years on human smuggling across different geographies. He equates the current ‘war of words’ regarding human smuggling to mistakes made in the global ‘war on drugs’ saga that started in the 1960s under president Nixon and continues to this day. The senior analyst, throws caution to the rhetoric and practices of counter-smuggling, especially as the world heads deeper into the century of displacement. Thus the practicalities means an effort to curb mobility, criminalise smugglers and equates them to enemies of the state — a security threat, in the same bracket as the most dangerous figures in political history.

The ‘war on smuggling’ since the summer of migration in 2015 has accelerated (Aversa, 2025; PICUM, 2025¹⁸; the new pact on migration and asylum 2024¹⁹; Anti-Smuggling Package²⁰). The issues debated in migration policy circles in Europe have been turned into a criminogenic one. The politics of migration as a security threat, has now turned reactionary. In the case of the Balkan states where this study is embedded, at the top of all recent bordering policy agendas are the commitments to counter human smuggling²¹. The critical borders body of academic work over the last two decades, has paid less attention to the overlapping of migration and borders as criminal²². Turning the West Balkan peninsular into a buffer zone has been the goal in the face of an era of idea of transnational mobility (Hess and Kasperek, 2019). For what is now commonly referred to as the ‘Balkan

¹⁸ <https://picum.org/blog/new-returns-regulation-ushers-in-dystopian-detention-and-deportation-regime/>

¹⁹ https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en#:~:text=The four pillars of the new migration and asylum policy,-Secure external borders&text=Robust screening: Those not fulfilling,and funding, in emergency situations.

²⁰ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/753190/EPRS_BRI\(2024\)753190_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/753190/EPRS_BRI(2024)753190_EN.pdf)

²¹ https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-12/Western_Balkans_en.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

²² Notable critical scholars include: Luigi Achilli, Gabriela Sanchez, David Suber, Karolina Augustova

Route' by politicians, migrants, activists and academics has been turned into a geography that inflates mobility control and crime fighting.

For instance, the EU's neocolonial, soft power programmes to ensure greater European market access for the region, adopts a "whole-of-route" approach to better manage mobility among the various migratory routes'²³. The 'Balkan route' itself features as part of 'EU's Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood' policy plans for border management. The European Council and the external dimension of EU migration policy engage in a multi-agency approach, incorporating FRONTEX, the EU asylum agency and Europol. This multi agency approach intends to support its neighbouring partners, because 'migration policies should not be dealt with in isolation'. Inside the 'western Balkan pact' the EU outlines all the money they have been spending on the Balkans as part of its wider strategy for the pre-accession instruments. Since 2021 350 million to improve 'migration management' for the entire region and 60 million package for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia for 2024 alone (47 million for 'migration governance and fight against organised crime' and another 13 million for deportations).

The partnership and engagement in continuing with making the western Balkan states the buffer(lands) of EUrope are maintained regularly through frequent summits, conferences, and shady working groups connected to the commission and securitisation think tanks (ICMPD) posing as human rights defenders (Ahmetašević and Wieser, 2022, published in the Left East website). In the capital of Albania, December 2022, the EU commission continues its 'strategic partnership' to curb numbers from crossing the 'Balkan route'. The summit concludes their continuation in committing to 30 Million Euro funds to the 'European multi-disciplinary platform against criminal threats (EMPACT)'. When taking a

²³ https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy/eu-support-partner-countries-migration-and-forced-displacement_en

closer look at the EMPACT results published in 2021 (for the period 2015-2020)²⁴, the multi agency lists its achievements; items and individuals, organisations they have managed to seize and close down. On the top of the list are people smugglers, followed by human traffickers, fraudsters, fire arms dealers, drug dealers, cyber criminals, paedophile rings, and money launderers.

Despite the criminal busts chalked up as wins, even by the EU's own figures, they show how vital smugglers are to the success for people to cross borders and routes to Europe. The 'European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation' (Europol) admits, "more than 90% of the irregular migrants that reach the EU make use of smugglers, either during parts or all of their journey." As Horwood (2021, p.5) reminds us, 'the war on human smuggling' is a 'smokescreen for efforts to curb irregular migration' not to combat criminals per se. The security-migration policy arena is a multi-million euro industry; border externalisation is big business, and bolsters political capital. In what Landherr (2024) terms the 'transit fix', the EU and its external country partners, attempt to (im)mobilise incoming populations through flooding millions of euros into the border regime, while the result is 'intensifying racial hierarchies' in the borderland space and attracting ever more structured responses (ibid).

This cash injection is felt in the borderland space in the form of border tech and state violence, thus the itineraries of people on the move requires the special knowledge and body power of smuggling labour, and people pay into the 'transit fix' for the labour of

²⁴ https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/58310/2022_291_empact-factsheets-2021_web_final.pdf

smugglers²⁵. Here the study argues the political economy of border externalisation creates more ‘criminality’ than it allegedly sets out to crush. Europol’s own statistics show 190 million in 2019 alone was spent to evade the state’s bordering infrastructure and personnel across all the routes to Schengen. A figure that only represents the tip of the ice berg.

By introducing Sami’s account at the top of this introduction is not an attempt to narrate a heroic masculine figure, flirtatious charmer, nor am I trying to paint a villain, or a victim, it is a story of the production of criminal(ization) of migration. His body is turned into the figure of a multimillion euro industry. The border regime produces multiple subjects along the land route; he moves from person on the move, guide, ‘security’, criminal fugitive, prisoner, and back to a person on the move. These multiple subjectivities are not isolated to the external borders of the Balkan states, they are presented as the modern day global threat to national security.

The unfolding saga of global inequality is replayed in the isolated spaces of borders and routes and the narratives of politicians. The discourse around migration in Europe has been reduced to point where mobility is synonymous with crime, diverting the gaze of publics, and concocting racialised moral panics. The everyday struggles for the right to live and be mobile, come up against a liberal securitisation technocracy coupled with the rhetoric of a nativist, populist right as Europe on the ‘defence’. Politicians and their stenographers package into neat, catchy soundbites — “illegal migration” and “smuggling gang” which plays into the cultural fears for online clicks, potential votes or simply to save one’s political career. But it doesn’t stop there; global crime conferences with the sole

²⁵ according to Europol figures equal amounts.

See here: https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/emsc_the_profits_of_smugglers_-_infographic.pdf

According to Europol in 2015 alone 3-6 Billion turnover in migrant smuggling was made by the ‘Organised crime networks’ and ‘individual criminal entrepreneurs’

See here: <https://www.imf.org/en/Data/Statistics/informal-economy-data/Reports/Eurostat-Smuggling-of-Migrants>

purpose of discussing how to ‘smash the gangs’²⁶ pulls in folk heroes like Kazawi and his band of brothers, men like Sami and his crew into the same policy documents as traffickers and global pedophile rings .

This has real-world effects on the ground and on social media accounts. This study is centred around the social world of the ‘working crew’, the organised, ‘dangerous men’ that work the borders. Figures of danger and violence, while also mediated on their own terms across social media profiles as figures of rebellion and pride as members of the ‘smuggling crew’, which are central to this research. The study is a political, sociological and as well as an anthropological account of lives at the border, experienced through a situated ethnography at the border(lands) that is always looking globally. The connections are made between places of origin, transit and destination, never linear, rather as entanglements (places, people, practices) circulating across the routes of the externalised Balkan peninsular (Stojic-Mitrovic and Vilenica, 2019). They are present not only through the material practices in which young migrant men perform their roles whether migrant or ‘smuggler’, but also through the digital worlds that are fast becoming important communication streams of what it means to cross a border and the cultural aesthetic young men identify with. Although these men and boys are at the centre of this study, the activists and the state are always present. They dip in and out of the crew’s socialities and more porously shape those social worlds. The empirical chapters to this study will explore accounts of labour in the political economies of border crossing; uncover the online narratives of these material practices and how border activism manages to maintain (or not) its ‘radicalism’ in a border regime where the commodification of survival and labour pervades nearly every social relation.

²⁶ “Smash the gangs” is a political slogan used by the labour government in reference to ‘organised’ crime groups profiting from charging people to cross the English channel

This study is a partial snippet into the border as a replayed chapter in an ongoing story about sedimented histories of dispossession and exploitation, re-produced into moral panics and border struggles. Walia (2013) cited in Gahman and Hjalmarson (2019) succinctly underlines borders are a continuation of an imperial technology, “*most severely deployed by those Western regimes that create mass displacement and [...] against those whose very recourse to migration results from the ravages of capital and military occupations.*” And social relations at the borders replay these injustices, whilst carving out life worlds of their own, no matter how limited and constrained they might be.

Research Puzzle

So what’s the situation on the ground, in the everyday socialities of bordering, smuggling labour and ‘border activism’. For many people crossing the Balkan route, their trajectory is rarely linear (Stojic-Mitorvic and Valencia, 2019). The land routes that traverse the south eastern peninsular are increasingly structured around the state authority’s policing and bordering strategies and the facilitation of non state actors, known commonly as smugglers and the (in)formal ‘infrastructures’ that support illegalised mobility (Suber, 2024). Although not impossible, and many do eventually succeed in going it alone²⁷, without having to pay for the services of a smuggler is increasingly a thing of the past²⁸. Critical voices have been arguing for decades that tighter and more punitive state bordering practices correlates with greater professionalisation in human smuggling networks globally (Horwood, 2022; GIATOC, 2018; UNODC, 2018), resulting in long periods of immobility (Jano and Vještica, 2025), and has a violent effect on the body, mind and the resources of migrants during transit (Orisini et al., 2022; Schindel, 2022; Isakjee et al., 2020).

²⁷ ‘The Game’ is the colloquial term given when someone is evading border police during a border crossing. During fieldwork I regularly heard the game being associated with a variety of ‘games’, including under the facilitation of smuggling services

²⁸ Even Europol’s own estimations even nine in ten people have used the services of non-state actors to be facilitated across national borders.

What have been termed the 'parallel' economies in an 'age of globalisation' (Bhattacharyya, 2005) are structured through the communities that young men can identify along shared social, cultural and geographical heritage. These men are found to be labourious where 'safe and legal' routes are not afforded. Border crossing relies on the body and affective labour of the populations bordering intends to criminalise. Thus the study is looking at the frontline of smuggling, placing the smuggler's material world in the study of smuggling along the Balkan route. This is a socio-material (Keshavarz, 2024), as well as a political economic study into the intersectionalities of border externalisation and labour (in smuggling). It is not a story about the 'mafia' boss sitting in a luxury apartment at the Belgrade Waterside, nor in the city of origin: Casablanca or Tataouin. Rather the study is interested in the border squat at the periphery of Europe, and how these border materialities form part of the parallel economies, becoming central to the racialisation of precarious forms of wageless labour that have become part and parcel of contemporary inter-regional labour markets.

On the whole, smuggling knowledge is predominantly underpinned by criminal justice and crime fighting paradigms (Janković, Marković and Ivanov, 2024). Currently there is a growing amount of scholarship that use qualitative design methods to uncover the invisible, opaque social relations that occur in economies linked to mobility; a move in the direction to 'de-criminalise' by focussing on non-Eurocentric epistemic knowledge; social and cultural practices underpinned by economies of morality and mutual aid (Achilli, 2018; Sanchez and Antonopoulou, 2023; Augustova and Suber, 2023). As I have already noted in this introduction, smugglers feature centrally in the European decision makers policy prescriptions, for example Nimkar and Mohammadi (2023) find smugglers are used in migration information campaigns in places of origin to deter future movement to

EUrope. Smugglers attempt to overcome demonisation with counter narratives with their social and cultural capital (narratives include anti-imperial struggles and corrupt central government officials narratives) (ibid).

As for European political culture, Borelli (2024) questions European centric assumptions, as smuggler's are constructed in the media into a moral panic has led governments equating the facilitators of irregular migration to 'terrorists'²⁹ requiring a security fix (Khiabany and Williamson, 2024). All the studies are various in their social, political and geographical contexts, while criminological perspectives have remained dominant (Baird and Van Liempt, 2016; Rainieri, 2021 in the Rutledge Handbook edited by Gallien and Weigand). Specifically to the Balkan route, empirical work on smuggling from Suber (2024) uncovering the state's own entangled relations with smugglers, and Augustova et al. (2023) makes the case for smuggling as a survival strategy for migrants en-route facing border violence. These two studies are close to the heart of this study, contextually and thematically, whilst differing in theoretical approach.

What remains under-explored and unexplored in the critical migration and border literature is first to situate illicit economies as central to the functioning of racial capitalism in EUrope — bordering is another terrain where capital accumulation takes place in late capitalist economies (Bhattacharrya, 2024; 2005) and how parallel informal parts of the economy are inherently sedimented in histories of racial difference in the pursuit of making surplus. Their labour intensive practices in the economies of border externalisation are sold into a smuggling system that requires more labour intensive work,

²⁹ Keir Starmer's words: pledges 150 million to his Border Security Command to "treat people smugglers like terrorists" as he views to use counter-terrorism tactics to stop smuggling 'gangs'
Published here: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwy1n2nwnyjo>

their labour is sold in return for mobility and future opportunity, not a wage³⁰. Thus smuggling has not been treated in the wider political economy of European capital and precarious labour markets and is still firmly rooted in criminology and anthropology (exception: Keshavarz and Khosravi, 2022).

The second part of this study delves into digitalities of border workers and the Serbian Ministry of Interior. The border is captured, uploaded and (live) ‘streamed’ by those living and labouring within its racialising logic. Whilst people on the move rely heavily on ‘smart phones’ to bypass, inform, and evade state authorities, working crews communicate their versions of the ‘border spectacle’ via social media channels. This chapter speaks more broadly to a method that is usually associated in recent time with citizen journalism, war crimes³¹, or included in powerful documentary films³². These videos are partial windows into the subjects in the film, as well as those behind the camera. Visual content is overlaid with narratives and symbols that critically engages materially with borders and transit routes.

The Sociological and Political science scholarship is pretty thin when it comes to the use of digital tech by smugglers. The studies that do exist are centred on the instrumental use of social media to find new customers (Özdemir et al., 2025) and harness ICT to communicate logistical information (Diba, Papanicolaou and Antonopoulous, 2019). Apart from smuggling tools, more broadly, migration research has found social media empowers

³⁰ many ‘smugglers’ were what I will later conceptually call ‘border workers’, some sold their labour whilst on the move — what I term ‘working on the move’, while others came to Serbia and Bosnia to work seasonally for a ‘wage’ often they were citizens or residence of Turkey or the EU, while the former category were undocumented and worked to move further into Europe.

³¹ Investigating war crimes in Gaza I Al Jazeera Investigations

³² Notable films: 1) ‘Selfie’ (2019) - 16-year old youths given phones to film their everyday lives in the suburbs of Naples 2) ‘Shadow Game’ — different groups of young migrant are given phone cameras to document their ‘games’ evading border control along the Balkan route

migrants to make better informed decisions (Zijlstra and Van Liempt, 2017) and steer away from smugglers altogether (Dekker et al., 2018). Outside of academia, knowledge production on smuggler's use of social media is the domain of criminal justice agencies (EUROPOL), hegemonic framing of the threats of social media, as a continuation of the (transnational) crime syndicate's power³³ and compromise of state security. Previous accounts of visual representation of the border and migrants at the border have been considered in critical sociology and migration studies, but limited to state and legacy media representations, discourses and frames (see. DeGenova, 2013 on the 'Border Spectacle'). The starting point for this study is found to be intellectually engaging when smuggling crews use the digital platforms to communicate their own visual narratives and performances, examining the autonomous agency displayed in the digitalities of border life and the mobile communes in which these men and boys spent most of their time. This school of thought in migration and border studies is driven primarily by the theoretical lens of the 'digital commons' that has its roots in the autonomy of migration approach (Trimikliniotis, Parsanoglou, and Tsianos, 2015; Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013; Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2010). Video material from the labourers of smuggling cannot be interpreted merely as solely a reaction to economic precarity in the political economy of bordering, but functions as a constituent force in shaping contemporary polity and social life, with its own collective logics and trajectories along the Balkan route.

In the third part of 'life at the border', the study presents 'activism' as a method to undermine the violence of the border regime focusing mostly on the north of Serbia. Activists live and work at the European external border, in places where they have very little previous social, or cultural connection. Some of the groups practice pre-figurative politics; structuring their organisational form on direct democracy and horizontal decision

³³ Europol press releases report on their latest crime busting

making in the anarcho-syndicalist tradition, while others stick to liberal advocacy repertoires and managerial styles of humanitarian assistance, albeit with caveats (explored in chapter 6). As NGOs and ‘noBorders’ direct actors find themselves living and working in institutional isolation and criminal(ized) borderlands, the study will uncover the challenges of working in the hyper-commodified transit spaces secured by the fixity of state security capital and the labour intensive regimes of smuggling from below and the everyday policing methods on the ground.

There has been copious amounts of literature on pro-migrant activism focused on European civil society engagement (Ambrosini, 2024), in ‘welcoming’ environments (Braun, 2020), esp. during and shortly after the long summer of migration in 2015. Within this ballooning in scholarship, authors were concerned with the contradictions of ‘humanitarian’ grassroot actors reproducing colonial practices (Picozza, 2021) and whether their function was a reliable co-optation of doing the work of the state and practising ‘humanitarianism’ (Fassin, 2012). Kleres (2018) has argued pro-migrant volunteerism in Germany has been driven by affects that have a depoliticising effect on civil engagement, while others have found that performing apolitical civic engagement is a pragmatic strategy (Nicholls, 2013a, 2013b) and a subversive form of action where the political is hidden behind the humanitarian (Vandevoordt and Verschraegen, 2017). Contrary to hidden or ‘covert activism’ (Fleischmann, 2018), when it comes to the ‘no borders’ networks, they attempt to practice solidarity with humanitarian methods (Zamponi, 2018). What has been under researched are everyday practical organisation and strategies to cope in criminal(ized) contexts. Border activists have had a hard time working through border regimes where the commodification of bordering pervades every facet of life at the border. I found in multiple contexts along the Balkan route that the radical edge of border activism is blunted by the power of the bordering regime by both organised facilitators (smuggling)

offering social reproductive roles and protection from policing measures, calling into question the viability of utopian prefigurative politics and rather engaging in ‘activist edgework’ (Kemp, 2024) in response to future dystopian (anti)-racial politics.

Correspondingly the above strands that make up the research focus interweaves the political economy of bordering with digitalities and activism that lie within it. This research is a partial window into how bordering is another strand in the multiplication of labour, differentiation of populations and the limits of border activism:

The study is guided by three research questions:

1. How is the labour of migrants made productive in the everyday practices that constitute border regimes and new forms of capital accumulation? And what are the strategies migrants employ to make themselves productive in these transit spaces and border infrastructures?
2. What do smuggling crews perform via social media channels along the Balkan route? And How do these visual frames, discourses and presentations critically engage with state power and sovereignty?
3. What are the strategies employed by activists in a context where the commodification of social relations blunts the politics of ‘Border Critical³⁴’ and abolitionist organisations? And how does pre-figurative political activism(s) realise their projects in the face of what can be considered dystopian times?

³⁴ I use my own term ‘border critical’ to describe the grassroots critical of the bordering regime without calling out an end to nation state bordering and for a utopian vision of a borderless world

In response to the research questions the study brings together strands of literature from political economy of bordering, but also from less economically determinist literatures that put onus on the cultural and sociological studies to explain moments of autonomy in the everyday life at the borderlands. Those literatures are explored in chapter 2. In chapter 3 details the epistemological position of the study and its methodological approach to blending border and digital ethnography are discussed.

Chapter 4 is the first chapter detailing the empirical findings of the study, focussing on the different types of labour that goes into frontline work of smuggling in northern Serbia (circa 2022-2023). First sketching out the geographical locations, materials and infrastructures, and the speed and frequency of mobility. Second the chapter touches on the affective and body labour of smuggling crews and their susceptibility to border violence. Thirdly, the petty economies essential to providing services for people stuck at the border, are practiced by the less fortunate young men that cannot afford to cross with a smuggler, thus they turn to sources of economic survival from the capital brought by financially resourceful migrants.

Chapter 5 is where the physical and digital intersect in the analysis. Through video content and ethnographical materials from the field, the border(land) becomes part of the aesthetic of migrant youth. Firstly video content communicates their extraordinary lives at the border, both displays of in-group solidarity and conflict. Secondly, the videos communicate the ability and prowess of workers to dare interact with the personnel and materials of state bordering — explicitly engaging with border materials critically. Third, the branding of working crew is blended with their ability to craft a certain border aesthetic which mixes a ‘gangster’ mythology with their own social and political identity from places of origin,

whilst these identities are capitalised by European nativist narratives in dodgy leaked documents and in state department's Youtube channel.

Chapter 6 is a deep dive into the daily practices of border activism. First, I sketch out the genealogies across three activists groups that were active in an inter-associational structure in an isolated institutional setting. Second, their situated practices when engaging with people on the move, find themselves preoccupied with navigating mostly criminal(ized) terrains and security concerns. They mitigate these realities by 'performing' positionalities to be able to be as strategic and effect as possible. Thirdly, activists find that in order to keep pace with the rapidly shifting nature of bordering governance in northern Serbia, they must rely on the knowledge of the "professional migrant," which in turn requires building trust in contexts where trust is scarce. What these sections do portray is a general sense of powerlessness in a border regime where bordering structures and corrupt police practices blunts the radicalism of social work from below. I argue this is mostly down to the social reproductive work done by the working crew that outweigh and ring fence the possibilities for solidarity and social care from the perspective of the European volunteer.

Chapter 7 Concludes by taking a step back from the empirical evidence to reflect on the implications of the Balkan route focussing on three recurring themes:

1. Frames of human smuggling and petty labour at the centre of border regimes yet their labour cannot be disentangled from global capital and wageless labour relations
2. Uncovers visual content that re-negotiates how border and migration routes are communicated to audiences and speaks a language and performance to their own subterranean cultural expressions of life and labour

3. Explores the limits of 'No Border' political cultures in global economies of bordering and mobility

Chapter 2 Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter outlines the theoretical and conceptual foundations of the thesis. It situates the study within critical debates on migration, labour, and bordering in Europe, advancing an understanding of borders as dynamic frontiers of racialised accumulation. Rather than treating borders as fixed lines of control, this chapter approaches them as spaces where capital, race, and labour intersect—producing everyday socialities and digitalities shaped and shaping bordering. The review draws on three interlinked literatures to build the thesis's conceptual architecture: racial capitalism, affective and reproductive labour, and borderwork.

The theoretical framework is grounded in the tradition of 'Racial Capitalism', following Cedric Robinson (2000, original 1983) and subsequent scholarship from the British variety (Bhattacharyya, 2018, 2024). This perspective rejects the idea of capitalism as universal, arguing that racial differentiation is at the heart of the new terrains of capital accumulation, with bordering being one of these terrains (Bhattacharyya, 2024). Borders, in this view, are not simply territorial devices but technologies that organise racialised mobility and extract value from movement and immobility alike. The European border regime, and the economies surrounding it, are thus understood as contemporary frontiers of accumulation where life, labour, and race converge.

Building from this, the conceptual framework is structured around three dimensions. First, 'borderwork is affective and is found productive in the parallel economies' sees borders as

spaces of labour and reproduction. Drawing on affective and social reproductive labour as a main feature in post-fordist forms of work, it highlights how migrants, activists and border workers perform the relational and emotional work that sustains movement and survival in hostile environments. Second, the relations of mediated 'border spectacles' and 'digitalities in the mobile commons' as 'visual governance' of migration from below; the digital worlds, circulation of images, rely upon networks of information and visual media shapes routes, decisions, and imaginaries of Europe and place-making at the borders and routes (Triandafyllidou and Massari, 2025; Trimikliniotis, Parsanaglou, Tsianos, 2015). Finally, the last section examines how solidarity networks, humanitarian actors, and migrant-led initiatives contest border governance. Together, these frameworks ground the thesis's central claim: that the European border regime operates through and depends upon racialised, affective, and communicative forms of labour and governance, sustaining mobility and intersecting with activist political cultures.

Critical approaches to Borders and Migration

For nearly two decades there has been an epistemological turn in the social, spatial sciences, political sociology and international relations when it comes to the political and societal changes in border control and mobility. By the time the freedom of movement for goods, services, and people in the 1990s and early 2000 expanded its EU's common project to ex-soviet parts of 'the east', substantial technological expansion in biometric data ran in conjunction with securitising borders, leading to scholars characterising a European 'fortress'. Ethnographic research in critical border and migration studies start to theorise 'the border' as processual and not merely a static territorial line demarcating a nation state's territory from another's (Rumsford, 2014; Parker and Nick Vaughn-Williams et al., 2009). One of the 20th century philosophers that has been influential in European border studies is the work of Michel Foucault (1991; 1975). The concepts he preposed at the dawn

of the neoliberal era was an understanding of control and power through the institutions. As one of the main figures in post-structuralist thought, concepts such as 'biopolitics', 'governmentality', 'the dispositif' were ways to grasp the insidious forms of power and control in economically 'advanced', liberal and democratic societies. Intervention puts onus on the experiences of migrants in European border regimes through the technological advancements of national and supranational agencies, databases, and bureaucracies to control mobility.

One of the main proponents of seeing the securitisation of borders through the concepts proposed by Foucault is the work of Stephen Scheel (2013). He argues the technologicalisation of border controls poses the greatest challenge to migration, as opposed to border controls as an economic reaction to regulate migrant labour. Conceptualising securitisation for Scheel (2013) relies on the Foucauldian concept of the 'security dispositif'. The dispositif — according to Foucault and others in the critical border studies group (Huysmans, 2006; Bigo, 2002) is a technology of government incorporating a range of 'actors and dispersed security practices, such as identification, information and surveillance technologies'. Thus these sets of literatures value how everyday institutionalisation of border security shapes the 'material terms and practical conditions for the emergence of possible moments of autonomy of migration' (Scheel, 2013). Thus Scheel (ibid) and others (Huysmans and Nogueira, 2023) take cases where the antagonism of technology and mobility are the sites to uncover the sociological undercurrent of bordering. Moreover this antagonism develops as the technological solutions produce correlative relations; freedom of movement is hinged on 'the intensified control of those classified as risky.'

The cases chosen in the technological driven studies are not only the domain of interrogating high systems, researchers also concern themselves with how migrants employ counter-tactics to the architecture of biometric databases like EURODAC, and Visa Information System. For instance, Canzutti and Tazzioli (2023) find that migrants deliberately alter their fingerprints to avoid registration as their desire to avoid identification is paramount to maintaining mobility. Ultimately, this technological surveillance is understood not merely as a technical fix, but as a site of political struggle over the selective denial and direct appropriation of mobility and rights (Scheel, 2013; Tazzioli, 2023).

Another set of literatures that emphasis the state's technological approach to mobility control concentrate on the site of the 'transit camp'. Claudio Minca (and colleagues see. Irit Katz) has written extensively on the history of the 'camp' and its contemporary manifestation as a modern spatial technology which serves to sort and arrange people by their biological characteristics. The concept of 'biopolitics' centres in the theoretical and methodological engagement to 'camp studies' in the field of migration. The analysis from Minca and Collins (2021) and Jordan and Minca (2023) critiques Giorgio Agamben's (1998) work (1995; 2003), which views the camp as the paradigmatic site where the biopolitical dimension of sovereign power operates by reducing interned subjects to "bare life" (without legal, social, or political rights). However, critics have also supplemented or contrasted biopolitics with concepts like 'necropolitics' (Mbembe, 2003; Davies, Isakjee and Dhesi, 2017) to capture more explicit forms of violence and state abandonment. In other interjections the idea of "biopolitics multiple" (Aradau and Tazzioli, 2020) accounts for the heterogeneous and intertwined technologies of control, extraction, and subtraction that manage migrant populations. Jordan and Minca (2023) complicate the security assemblage by uncovering the 'micro-politics' of makeshift camps, that are self-run by

migrants themselves during transit. Rather than totally oppositional to the regime they are conceptualised as harbouring their own internal hierarchies and differential access, power, privileges, violence and exclusion dictated by diverse actors including ‘camp leaders’ related to ‘smuggling networks’ and the state and humanitarian complexes own infrastructures (ibid).

The securitisation approach has further been applied to theorising externalisation of the EU’s borders. The Western Balkan states, in particular, are frequently conceptualized as a fluid space known as the Western Balkan Route (Minca and Collins, 2021). This corridor, spanning countries such as Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, is characterized as a geostrategic zone of migratory transit (Augustová et al., 2023) or as a buffer zone—or “purgatory”—for the EU, designed to restrict mobility before it reaches Western Europe (Carter-White and Minca, 2025). Marta Stojić-Mitrović and Valenica (2019) frame the Western Balkans as a “borderscape” of the EU, adapting Appadurai’s concept of global flows—of people, technology, ideas, finance, and media—to the EU’s externalization landscape (Brambilla, 2015). For Stojić-Mitrović and Valenica (2019), the Western Balkan space has shifted from a linear transit corridor to a zone of forced circular movement—the “Balkan Circuit”—as a result of securitarian measures. Similarly, Minca and colleagues describe the Balkan Route as an ‘archipelago’ of dispersed border camps functioning as network nodes that manage informal mobilities, often located near borders or in isolated industrial wastelands (Augustová et al., 2022).

Other scholars have conceptualized the Western Balkans as a region where the EU outsources its violence to spaces concealed from the public gaze of liberal democracies (Isakjee et al., 2020). Violence here is often subtle, everyday, and structural—manifesting through neglect and abandonment, however, direct physical violence—such as assaults and

theft—is routinely enacted (Isakjee et al., 2020). Beyond direct violence, geography itself can become violent through governmental (in)action (Davies, Isakjee, and Dhesi, 2017). Recent work by Benghellab, Davies, and Isakjee (2025) shows how seasonal changes are exploited by state officials to harm and immobilize migrants, forcing them onto more dangerous routes across treacherous terrain.

Regarding the various actors involved in bordering, significant attention has been paid to the EU, state authorities, and partner states, including those in the Western Balkans. Studies focusing on the EU highlight its role as the orchestrator of border regimes, providing incentives—through funding and political leverage—to enact border violence (Isakjee et al., 2020). For non-EU states, their role has been dual: both humanitarian and securitarian. Carter-White and Minca (2025) argue that the evolution of camp infrastructure is central to these states’ geopolitical strategies. Not only the camp but during border crossing and during mobility, Augustová details in her book *Everyday Violence at the EU’s External Borders: Games and Pushbacks* (2023), how border violence is enacted by security actors, revealing the racial and gendered dimensions of the border regime. Her work, along with evidence-based advocacy by BVMN (Davies, Isakjee, Obradović-Wochnik, 2023), employs militant research methods to document human rights abuses and to produce alternative epistemologies that challenge dominant narratives.

There are a whole set of other literatures that have approached the topic of European bordering and power from the history of subjugated people, and sovereignty attempts to control them. This takes a wholly different epistemological lens by understanding politics from the migrants own strategies. The concept since the mid-2000s has been a body of work in the philosophy of anti-capitalist and prefigurative politics of alternative political, social, and cultural futures (Yates, 2020), based on common interests among disparate groups (Trimiklinotis, Parsanoglou and Tsianos, 2015). This political philosophy tradition

comes out of Italian autonomist tradition (the affective politics of Negri and Hardt, 2000) and the anti-austerity greek radicalism (landmark contribution from Papadoupoulous, Stephenson and Tsianos, 2008). They have coalesced around theoretical and philosophical ideas that has led to a body of empirical work producing a series of books on the 'autonomy of migration.' Whereas the foucauldian proponents tend to look at the ways in which state power has been shaped over the course of history, the autonomists look to the excesses of history, those characters which 'are never completely absorbed into the order of power' (Papadoupoulous and Tsianos, 2007, p.136). Contemporary critical migration studies have increasingly shifted focus from institutional governance and state perspectives toward examining the autonomous agency of mobile populations, driven primarily by the theoretical lens of the autonomy of migration approach (Papadoupoulous and Tsianos, 2010). This perspective posits that migration is not merely a reaction to political or economic necessities but functions as a constituent force in shaping contemporary polity and social life, with its own logics and trajectories that control mechanisms subsequently attempt to manage (ibid).

A central critique advanced by this literature is that traditional concepts of citizenship function as a foundational structure of sovereign control, operating as a "wall" that delimits rights and representation (Papadoupoulous and Tsnianos, 2013). Citizenship is presented as the "toll of sovereign governance" regulating the balance between who is entitled to rights and who is deemed inexistent (ibid). This system results in differential inclusion, creating various subjects of labor differentiated primarily through immigration controls and legal statuses (Papadoupoulous, Stephensen and Tsianos, 2008). Rather than blocking movement entirely (a 'failing' metaphor dubbed "Fortress Europe"), modern control mechanisms focus on regulating the speed and magnitude of flows, a mechanism described as porocracy—the 'futile attempt' to regulate the porosity of borders

(Papadoupoulous and Tsianos, 2010; Tsianos and Karakayali, 2010). This temporal control attempts to make the speed of absorption into local labor markets compatible with the speed of mobile populations, often utilizing camps as temporary regulatory or "speed boxes" (ibid).

In response to this regime, mobile people construct alternative forms of existence encapsulated by the concept of the mobile commons (Trimikliniotis, Parsanoglou, Tsianos, 2016). This is conceived as a "flat mundane ontology of the moving people", defined by the sharing of resources, knowledge, and mutual support (Papadoupoulis and Tsianos, 2013). This organizational ontology is neither state-owned nor strictly private, but is generated through "commoning" practices (ibid). Key components of the mobile commons include invisible knowledge about routes, borders, policing, and survival tactics (Papadoupoulis, Stephensen and Tsianos, 2008); an infrastructure of connectivity often involving digitalities, social media, and geolocation technologies; informal economies; and, critically, politics of care that involve affective cooperation, mutual support, and trust (Trimikliniotis, Parsanoglou, Tsianos, 2022).

The struggles of mobile populations are fundamentally tied to the changing nature of capitalism, where exploitation goes beyond the workplace to involve the appropriation of the worker's whole situated existence (Papadoupoulis and Tsianos, 2013). The very capacity to be mobile, especially in adverse circumstances, is extracted for surplus value (Papadoupoulis and Tsianos, 2010). Subaltern migrant lives are characterized by precarity (precarious labor, stay, and lives) (Trimikliniotis, Parsanoglou, Tsianos, 2015), and their resistance often takes the form of "imperceptible politics" (Papadoupoulis and Tsianos, 2007), or "social non-movements" (Bayat, 2013). Migrants defy the logic of both labor and citizenship, exemplified by the phrase, "I work only for papers" (Trimikliniotis,

Parsanoglou, Tsianos, 2015), signalling that their primary labor is the relentless effort to acquire the legal status needed for movement, rather than the work itself being secondary. This focus on the "mundane organizational practices" of mobile subjects ultimately forces a critical departure from citizenship as the ultimate horizon of political analysis.

What has been termed as the 'autonomy of migration' is a useful frame to interrogate everyday bordering practices by state actors in relation to the people they seek to control. Many authors draw on mobilities literature to highlight migrants' agency and strategies of survival. A growing body of work centres on what migrants colloquially call "the game"—a term for their attempts to evade state authorities during border crossings—which has since applied to the Balkan route (Augustova, 2023). Minca and Collins (2021) explore "the game" as a spatial tactic, emphasising migrants' determination and the informal governance of mobility shaped by both state and non-state actors. Zocchi (2023) interprets these "games" as ritualised acts of subversion and endurance against the state's politics of exhaustion. These studies share a commitment to understanding migrants as active agents who shape, and are shaped by, border policies and practices rather than as passive victims of state power.

While these studies centred on the perspective of migrants, there are broader networks of actors involved. Scholars from the region have traced the evolution of activists, NGOs, and grassroots volunteers over the past decade. Anthropologists such as Marta Stojić-Mitrović and Marijana Hameršak (recently contributing to Campbell et al., 2025) have long documented the No Borders movement and local activist organizations, which Stojić-Mitrović (2019) describes as a "parallel system" operating outside of state control. Collins and Minca (2021) go further, integrating this parallel system of activists and volunteers into "the geographies of the game," where they indirectly support migrant mobility. In the same study, spaces are linked to smuggling networks as part of these geographies, showing

how such actors are entangled in the border regime from below. Similarly, Augustová et al (2023) focus on survival strategies in border towns near the EU, revealing how young men blur the boundaries between smuggler and migrant.

The above scholarship focussing on autonomy of migration along the ‘Balkan Route’ shows how relationships within these informal border spaces can be both exploitative and protective, forming precarious yet vital infrastructures of mobility in a violent political landscape. Studies examining the everyday processes of state bordering—and the actors involved in facilitating mobility to evade state control—draw on both Foucauldian and Marxist concepts to build constructivist arguments about relational power dynamics that go beyond sovereignty. Perspectives emphasising technological as well as human agency challenge the pessimistic realism of total state control.

In summary, Foucauldian approaches to migration and borders see border control as a dispersed apparatus of biopolitical governmentality in which states and institutions seek to render mobile populations visible, classifiable, and governable. Bordering, in this view, places greater emphasis on the regulatory dispositifs that produce subjects through surveillance, documentation, and differential inclusion. The ‘autonomy of migration’ perspective on the other hand, while drawing on Foucault’s relational understanding of power, reverses this analytical direction by beginning from the agency of movement itself. Rather than treating migrants as objects of biopolitical management, it foregrounds their practices of mobility as forces that precede and unsettle regimes of control. Power, from this perspective, is reactive and adaptive, emerging in response to the unruly excess of migration.

Both frameworks, however, converge in viewing borders as productive and dynamic sites of negotiation between control and mobility. Taken together, they illuminate how practices of migration both reproduce and exceed the biopolitical techniques through which states

seek to govern life and movement. What remains largely absent from these approaches and related empirical writings are the sedimented histories of race within the neo-colonial structures of EUropean sovereignty and the contemporary global political and economic system. Apart from the contributions of Augustová (2023) and Isakjee et al. (2020), race and capital tends to appear implicitly in discussions of migrant strategies and state control or is omitted altogether. A theoretical framework that interrogates the ‘Balkan route’, or any migratory route, within the broader economies of racial accumulation remains less developed.

In contrast, the ‘Racial Capitalism’ tradition, grounded in the work of Cedric Robinson, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and British marxists Bhattacharyya (2018; 2024) and Kundnani (2023) situate migration politics within a historical structure of racialized accumulation, where race is not incidental but constitutive of capitalist development and the organization of labor. Whereas the autonomy of migration emphasizes subjective agency and the excess of movement, racial capitalism highlights the systemic production of racial hierarchies and differential inclusion as mechanisms of accumulation and control. Bringing these perspectives into dialogue enables a more dialectical understanding of migration, one that recognises how migratory practices embody forms of autonomy and resistance while remaining deeply entangled in the racialised violence and extractive logics of global ‘securitisation’ capitalism.

Racial Capitalism and Bordering

This thesis draws on a collection of authors that have written under the banner of ‘Racial Capitalism’. Authors mainly from the UK and the US have picked up on its explanatory uses in understanding current debates centred on the intersections of emergent forms of racialised accumulation under capitalist system(s). To start with, I want to emphasise

Bhattacharyya's introduction to 'The Future of Racial Capitalism' (2024, p.3), where she emphasizes that racial capitalism as a "question not an answer" — there is no grand plan or grand master of Racial Capitalism, it is a 'tricky beast' to pin down. Boiled down to a concentrate, 'Racial Capitalism' analytically focuses on the shifting processes of capital accumulation and state power (ibid). More specifically for the purposes of this study, racial capitalism as an analytical frame connects world system(s) of accumulation to border politics and capital and everyday practices. Up until this point the economies of transit that exist along the Balkan route have not been treated in the literature through the lens of 'racial capitalism'. First I want to lay out some of the foundational concepts of 'racial capitalism' and its wider implications for an 'everyday' political economic understanding of bordering.

Since European social enquiry developed a scientific method, differentiation has been central to understanding social change. In the Durkheimian sense of differentiation, modernity moved from segmentary differentiation to mechanical solidarity, as societies become more complex this led to a proliferation of divisions of labour and specialisation to meet the demands of the complexity of industrial society. Sociologists have approached differentiation from a number of field sites, for instance, Weber (1968 original 1921) saw differentiation of society from the complexity of bureaucratic organisation, developing distinct forms of values, actions and institutional structures. Later on, systems theorists looked at differentiation as autonomous sub systems with no one system overruling the other (horizontalism) (Luhmann, 1995 original 1984 Title: 'Social Systems'). Foucault (1975) carried on in the tradition of institutional analysis by looking at how relatively autonomous institutions disciplined subjects by differentiating the individual; body, capacity to perform labour and its moral tendencies — discipline was the dominant form of power. In Hegelian philosophy, an abstract universal that is self contradictory, synthesises

conflictual positions which western marxism applied to the world proletariat, a homogenised figure under the universal system of industrial capital. However, Deleuze and Guattari (1994) disputed the unification of social structures by arguing differentiation is difference in itself, a proliferation of irreducible differences always in flux and not reducible to the single person.

More applicable to the studies of race and capital, in the 1970s theorists from the UK (Birmingham School) in cultural studies, such as Stuart Hall, drew on the Gramscian idea of hegemony. Hall and Colleagues (2013 original 1978) highlights how 'subaltern groups' articulate their own expressions of difference within structures of the political, social and cultural hegemony at a particular point in history helped reveal the 'conjuncture', avoiding class reductionism, and incorporating media and other institutions into the 'totality'. Thus, differentiation is a relational process that operates through distinctions such as black and white, us and them, rich and poor (ibid). It is shaped in relation to the subaltern's culture or identity, just as it is constituted through the classificatory practices of the dominant culture. Hall (1996) not directly connected to the 'racial capitalism' study group but has been connected to it through his work on British culture and its familiarity to race and capital, bringing closer to the current idea of differentiation, as according to Robinson (2000) differences in race is the organising logic of capital.

Differentiation for Bhattacharyya (2024, p.9) is at the centre of an inquiry 'to analyse the workings of a capitalism that places different segments of the world in different quarters of the economy in different logics and rhythms of the accumulative project.' The idea of segmentation or ordering is picked up by Melamed (2015, 78), as she observes at the heart of racial capitalism is not to homogenise populations but its ongoing processes of partition 'as the base algorithm for capitalism to control who can relate and under what terms.'

The term ‘racial capitalism’ comes from Robinson’s seminal work on ‘Black Marxism: The Black Radical Tradition’ by flipping the historical analysis in Marxism on its head. Robinson’s (2000, p.26) central reading of Marxism here is to undo the Euro-centrism of Marxist thought that overlooked, the transatlantic slave trade as the precursor for capitalist system as we know it today. Moreover, the current adherents of racial capitalism (Gilmore, 2007; Melamed, 2015) follow in his central claim, of the “tendency of European civilization through capitalism was thus not to homogenize but to differentiate—to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into ‘racial’ ones”. At the heart of the technologies of exaggerated difference in the times of enslavement was race, which Robinson (2000) argues continued into capitalism’s epistemology; its ordering principle, its organising structure, its moral authority, its economy of justice, commerce and power. A recent influential study that has expanded the thesis of racial capitalism is the influential work of Ruth Gilmore’s (2007) ‘The Golden Gulag’ — a study of the prison system in Los Angeles, her definition of Racial Capitalism is still often cited and bears including here: “Racism...[as a] state-sanctioned and or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death, in distinct yet densely interconnected political geographies.” Gilmore’s work is why critical and political geography has been very influential in the ‘Racial Capitalism’ research group on the matters of bordering.

Despite this body of work, racial capitalism has been criticised for its analytical primacy of differentiation of race over class analysis (Michaels, 2006; Wood, 1999), and reifying race rather than deconstructing its mystification (Fields and Fields, 2012). For Wood (1999) an analysis of race and capitalism ‘obscures relations of class exploitation’, thus ‘deflecting attention away’ from the core conflict in capitalism; capital and waged workers. Other writers, point to how Marx had already introduced histories of slavery and colonialism into

his understanding of capitalist production and class analysis (1976 [1867] Capital volume 1), refuting Robinson's originality in 'Black Marxism' and the Black Radical Tradition.

In response to these criticisms, what the 'Black tradition' (Robinson, 2000) offered was a historical analysis of capitalism that did not present race and class as two autonomous systems (Kundnani, 2023). The explanatory power of 'Racial Capitalism' is that racism is always under construction to serve accumulation, rather than an ideological legacy from slavery (Wood, 1999). This rendition of 'Racial Capitalism' looks at how Marx and orthodox Marxists in the 20th century were misguided by thinking that capitalist production would have a universalising effect on the proletariat, instead, a variety of 'forms of unfree labour' in combination with 'different modes of production' took place at different periods in history (Hall, et al., 1978). This is very useful in studying the role of labour practices that exist in the border regime's own 'franchise', the labour of the global dispossessed class, especially in this study, racialised migrant men and boys, are incorporated and are exploited by the formal political economy of bordering in Europe (Lori and Schiller, 2020).

Capitalism has been associated in Marxian terms with a history of 'accumulation by dispossession' fixing a set of social and economic relations to produce surplus gains for the capitalist class (Harvey, 2003). In the original Marxian term, 'primitive accumulation' was one of the precursors for upending the peasantry class into mechanistic forms of urban industrialisation, but Harvey (ibid) points to dispossession in the metropolises through less visibly violent means of privatisation, financialisation and commodification (Kundnani, 2020). Following on from Harvey (2005; 2003), Bhattacharyya (2024, p.12) notes that once the 'theft, murder and expropriation' of people and resources have been devoured, capitalist accumulation fixes itself on to new spatial horizons. David Harvey's (1981)

“spatial fix” concept posits that capitalism resolves its inherent crises of over accumulation and declining profit rates by temporarily displacing them through geographical expansion and restructuring.

Bird and Schmid (2023) stretch this understanding further with the “migration fix,” arguing that it encompasses not only straightforward spatial expansion but also an “array of bordering, channeling and containment practices to regulate surplus populations”. This fix is deeply intertwined with racial capitalism, serving both economic rationales (managing displaced populations for profit extraction through dequalification, categorization, and containment) and broader political and social imperatives, including nativist projects of racial hegemony. NGOs and humanitarian actors, often unwittingly, become implicated in this “humanitarian industrial complex,” (Dadusc and Mudu, 2020) participating in the management of racialized surplus populations and perpetuating “secondary exploitation” by restricting access to work and services, exposing migrants to indebtedness, and invalidating qualifications. The “migration fix” also manifests in the “workerisation” of asylum seekers and refugees, where policies compel their participation in labor markets to fill shortages, often under precarious legal frameworks and conditions (Schmidt and Bird, 2025). For instance, legalisation programs in countries like Greece and Italy have become increasingly selective, offering temporary, conditional statuses that maintain migrant precarity and facilitate informal labor.

On the other hand, Landherr (2024) introduces the “transit fix” as a specific spatial fix where border externalization leads to the immobilization and differential integration of migrant flows into transit states, the author uses the “EU-Turkey Deal,” as an example where locking people into immobility addresses labor shortages. This process is not merely economic; it is racialized, producing and intensifying racial antagonisms, such as anti-

Syrian sentiment in Turkey, through the super-exploitation of negatively racialized and legally subordinated labor pools. Such fixes rely on externalizing actors covering some social reproduction costs (e.g., humanitarian cash programs) to maintain a highly exploitable labor source. These border regimes, therefore, are not contradictory but rather simultaneously ‘monetized’ and ‘militarized’, creating possibilities for capital accumulation by constructing and regulating divisions within the working class.

An important take away from the concept of spatial fix to the concept of borders and bordering is that mobile populations that are caught within its institutional processes are histories of dispossession and contemporary exploitation, which are interwoven and always present in social relations at the border (Bhattacharyya, 2024). Walia (2013, p.5) cited in Gahman and Hjalmarson (2019) explains this dispossession-exploitation dialectic in her work on borders as a continuation of an imperial technology. Moreover, borders and bordering has been written about, not only as a global imperialistic process, it is a continuation of the division of the commons, the nation state project which divides global commonality (Anderson, Sharma, and Wright, 2011). This is why the border-(lands) and the people that do the labour in these spaces are important to observe as capital ‘force[s] new populations into varieties of market relations’ outside of the wage relation (Bhattacharyya, 2024, p.12).

According to Kundnani (2020) the latest epoch (neoliberalism) in capitalist restructuring has created the greatest surplus of populations globally in the history of humankind. Kundnani (2023) states surpluses are the limits to capital’s reach, thus Racial capital attempts to ‘organise’, through coercive violence into regimes of accumulation (Bhattacharyya, 2024). In light of the above literature, the concept of relative surplus populations and affective labour and what they mean for the parallel economies as they are

‘hidden forms of racialised labour’, outside of the normal wage relations and informal economies are explored.

Relative Surplus Populations (RSP) is another concept taken from political economy to describe the portion of the working-age population that is surplus to the immediate needs of capital for waged labor at any given place and time (Marx, 1990). These individuals often experience un- or under-employment, hyper-exploitative work, lack of a living wage, and an increasing inability to meet basic subsistence needs (Soederberg and Bernards, 2021). The significance and composition of the RSP are directly related to the social processes of capital accumulation (Ibid). From the perspective of individual workers, being "surplus" is usually a temporary and contingent state, meaning "every worker belongs to it during the time when he is only partially employed or wholly unemployed" (ibid, p.415). Increasingly, authors expand on this by noting that exploitation does not only occur through wage labor. Gimore's (2008) book 'Golden Gulag' argues, the prison system in LA as a crisis in capitalist over accumulation, in the spirit of Harvey (1981), she applies the spatial fix, to the prison, as a capital 'fix' to warehouse unemployed (mostly) black inner city populations from deindustrialisation. Secondary or indirect exploitation through debts and rents is crucial, especially for those unable to secure sufficient waged work (Chakravartty and da Silva, 2012). This secondary face to global capitalism today is structured round processes of racialization and gendered patterns of social difference that structure particular sections of the economy along cultural lines (Hall, 1986). Debates on RSPs and racialization are notable in the governance and hyper-exploitation of migrants and refugees. Refugees are often seen as "disposable populations" or "unwanted populations" who are simultaneously "brought into the folds of capital accumulation" through new forms of indebtedness (Baghat and Roderick, 2020; Bhagat, 2019).

Structures of 'Raical Capitalism' thrives from processes that distribute populations into racialised opportunities (Bhattacharyya, 2024). The socio-economic and cultural life and labour that exists along migration routes are often hidden, yet deeply entangled with the (in)formal economies of border towns, transit camps, metropolises, and peripheral borderlands. Bhattacharyya (2005; 2024) draws attention to these 'parallel economies', which reflect racial divisions between waged labour and the swelling informal sector. These divisions are not accidental: they emerge from social hierarchies and values that determine who is permitted to access waged work, under what conditions, and who is rendered exploitable or, conversely, deemed un-exploitable (Rajaram, 2018).

Those rendered surplus by processes of exploitation and dispossession are often driven underground, made productive within criminalised sectors of work — sex work, smuggling, or other “amoral” economies can be mapped across history. In classical Marxist terms, these populations were cast as the lumpenproletariat, a class too dangerous for political solidarity (Kundnani, 2020). Yet, often migration debates remain restricted to the terms of state security and labour market devaluation (autonomy of migration and Foucauldian, techno-pessimism), overlooking how sovereign violence historically disciplines, classifies, and criminalises the dispossessed as not fitting the standardised proletarian figures for exploitation and capital accumulation (the factory worker under Fordism) (Kelley, 2018). Throughout history, capital has never been able to absorb all populations into (re)-productive capacities (Gilmore, 2007; Kundnani, 2023), it relies on social and spatial technologies; from the workhouse to the detention centre to terrorise those who do not conform to its systems (Papadopoulos et al., 2008). For an example, the vagabond is the historical precursor to the 'migrant', a mobile subject escaping the most carceral and punishing forms of capital accumulation (ibid). Kelley (ibid) reminds us that we see the traces of these histories in the landless, propertyless, and criminalised — prostitutes,

beggars, *smugglers*, and *bandits* — whose survival often takes form outside the 'authoritarian fix' or 'liberal fix', their practices are made material in socio-spatial compositions like the ghetto, favela, barrio, camp, prison or the *borderland* (Agier, 2002; Bruff, 2014).

From the 'Racial Capitalism' paradigm a handful of studies have touched on the core concepts developed by David Harvey, Cedric Robinson, and continued by British Marxists Bhattacharyya (2018, 2024) and Kudnani (2023). In the field of migration in Europe, race and capital is not brought at the front and centre of social relations at the border. It is as if the authors make transit countries into other places of externalisation completely detached from the global economy. Taking into consideration European humanitarianism (Bird and Schmit, 2023) and externalisation policy (Landherr, 2024) has been treated with Harvey's 'capital fix' concept, Racial Capitalism has had relatively slow traction in the European migration studies. To capture the everyday living practices that results in materialities, socialities and solidarities along the 'Balkan Route', concepts developed from authors specifically on labour and the re-production of bordering will be examined further.

Borderwork, Affective Labour and Racialised Social Reproduction

Debates around affective labour emerged in the late 20th century as industrial work was restructured in the 'global North'. Post-workerist political philosophers developed these ideas while refusing incorporation into the production process, extending Marxist analyses of class and capital to new divisions of labour under post-Fordism (Mezzadra and Neilsen, 2013). This intellectual movement sought to make sense of a shift from industrial to service and knowledge economies, where immaterial labour came to produce not tangible commodities but immaterial products such as information, communication, affect, and cultural content. Immaterial labour thus produces social relations as much as it produces

goods (Mezzadra, 2005). Affective labour therefore produces feelings—ease, satisfaction, passion, attachment (Hardt and Negri, 2005; 2000) —and becomes one of the strongest links in capitalist postmodernisation (Hardt, 1999). The capacity to communicate, empathise, and create affective relations becomes a mode of accumulation (Mezzadra and Neilsen, 2013), as the boundaries between labour and life collapse.

Thinking through border crossing and the labours of migration—waiting, planning, negotiating—these concepts help to analyse the affective infrastructures of mobility and smuggling. In contexts where moving ‘alone’ is nearly impossible, affective strategies are vital for survival (Vogt, 2016). Trust, loyalty, and reputation become forms of symbolic and material worth, echoing Bourdieu’s theories of social and cultural capital (Nimkar and Mohammadi, 2023). Within the racialised economies of mobility, affective labour is thus bound up with survival and accumulation at the border, intertwining with the racialised hierarchies of capitalism itself.

Social reproduction offers another key lens for understanding how labour sustains life and capital across borders. Emerging from feminist theory, social reproduction refers to the processes that maintain and reproduce the workforce and the social relations of production (Bourdieu, 1973; Hess, 2007). Since Hochschild’s *The Managed Heart* (2012) illuminated the commodification of emotional labour, scholars have shown how affective and reproductive work underpin gendered and racialised divisions of labour (Parreñas, 2001). What was once unpaid domestic work supporting the male industrial worker has become commodified and outsourced to precarious migrant labour (Bhattacharyya, 2024).

Mobility itself becomes surplus to capital, as migrant labour is displaced into the shadowlands of informal and illicit economies—sex work, gig work, smuggling—constituting racialised and feminised forms of social reproduction (Ticktin, 2011). Smuggling, in this sense, is embedded in the reorganisation of social reproductive labour,

sustaining the economies and socialities that emerge around borders and camps. Following Bhattacharyya (2024), social reproduction today is not a supplement to production but a central site of value extraction: "the activity of social reproduction enters the market not as a supplement to the productive economy... but as its own activity with value expropriated and circulated without reference to a wage" (p.17). This draws attention to the everyday labours of care, feeding, communication, and cooperation that sustain economic and social life in transit and immobility.

Ethnographic studies of smuggling similarly reveal relational dynamics that go beyond the transactional figure of the ruthless, exploitative smuggler (Achilli, 2015; Sanchez, 2017; Triandafyllidou, 2018). Smugglers' work often operates within moral economies shaped by religious duty, community obligation, and mutual recognition. Maher (2018) describes smugglers who see ensuring their passengers arrive *sain et sauf* (safe and sound) as a moral or religious duty, while prices are negotiated relationally through *waxhaalé* (bargaining) depending on social proximity or circumstance. Such practices reveal the affective and reproductive dimensions of smuggling labour—its reliance on trust, empathy, and shared risk.

Yet these relations are not free from violence or exploitation. Augustova et al. (2023) show how state violence and smuggling intersect, as migrants rely on facilitators for protection in contexts of militarised borders (see also Sanchez, 2017). Exploitation in smuggling is thus inseparable from the structural violence of restrictive migration policies (Achilli, 2024). While dominant narratives cast smugglers as predatory and migrants as passive victims, empirical work points to a complex relational field of dependency, reciprocity, and survival within border economies.

In critical border studies the concept of *borderwork* captures the everyday practices through which borders are enacted, resisted, and reproduced (Rumford, 2008; Raineri,

2021). Borderwork emphasises local agency, multiplicity, and the entanglement of citizens and non-citizens in sustaining regimes of control (Cold-Ravnkilde, 2021). It also invites attention to the labouring processes that underpin bordering—how the management, crossing, and reproduction of borders rely on forms of human work, often racialised and informal. Smuggling can therefore be approached as *borderwork*: a form of racialised labour embedded in global divisions of mobility and capital. From a labour studies perspective, smuggling is work—precarious, informal, and often carried out by migrants themselves who become brokers, guides, or “connection men” (Richter, 2022; Ayalew Mengiste, 2018). Far from the image of transnational crime syndicates, this is a form of everyday labour that provides mobility as a service under conditions of exclusion (Sanchez, 2017; Sanchez and Zhang, 2018). It is often temporary, volatile, and low-paying, combined with other survival-oriented work in informal economies (Perkowski and Squire, 2019; Bourgois, 2003).

This work is deeply racialised. Migrant smugglers are often members of racialised groups themselves, positioned at the sharp end of enforcement regimes. As Richter (2022) and Palister-Wilkins (2022) show, in Mauritania and Morocco racial profiling and police violence blur distinctions between smugglers and “all black migrants.” Racialisation here operates as a form of border control, marking certain bodies as inherently suspect, criminal, or mobile. Smuggling journeys can be dangerous, exposing participants to suffering, death, and disappearance — including the smuggler (Brachet, 2018; Manwaring, 2016; Scharrer et al., 2024; Achilli, 2024). Migrants encounter overlapping violences from state authorities, criminal groups, and environmental hazards (Achtnich, 2022), while militarised borders do not deter movement but redirect it into more precarious and potentially deadly events (Achilli, 2024; Sanchez and Zhang, 2018). Borderwork thus reveals the dialectic of labour and control: as the state expands enforcement, it generates new forms of informal and racialised labour to sustain mobility.

There is a group of authors that have wrtitten extensively on the *political economy of externalisation*—the EU’s strategy of outsourcing border control to neighbouring states (Vammen, Cold-Ravnkilde & Lucht, 2022). This process extends border violence while generating local economies of control. Detention, deportation, and surveillance infrastructures in Libya or southeastern Europe (Achtnich, 2022; Isakjee et al., 2020) exemplify what Raineri (2022) calls a “predatory bioeconomy,” where human mobility itself becomes a source of profit. Value is extracted not only from migrants’ labour but from their vulnerability and movement: from the management of their “bare life” to the monetisation of their social worlds. At local levels, externalisation produces entanglements of formal authority and informal survival (Rainieri, 2022). Border governance relies on relationships of corruption, patronage, and bribery that sustain movement and revenue (Suber, 2024). Officials profit from cross-border flows (Goodhand and Walton, 2022; Nimkar and Mohammadi, 2023), while smugglers and guards negotiate informal arrangements to ensure survival. Such practices are not merely “corrupt” deviations from governance but constitute its everyday infrastructure (Meagher, 2003; Ferguson, 2006). As border regimes harden, the demand for facilitators grows, creating a self-perpetuating cycle where restriction fuels the very clandestine economies it seeks to eliminate (Triandafyllidou, 2018; Vammen, Cold-Ravnkilde & Lucht, 2022).

Historically, smuggling is not an aberration but part of longstanding cross-border economies. Before the imposition of colonial borders, trade networks across Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia facilitated mobility and exchange (Djimba, 1997). In times of geopolitical crisis, these networks adapt to new forms of governance and warfare (Ahmad, 2008)). The contemporary EU border regime overlays these older routes, transforming them into sites of both survival and extraction (Ayalew, Adunga & Deshingkar, 2018). Border communities—drivers, traders, hotel owners, and officials—are deeply embedded in

this economy, dependent on and affected by EU “neighbourhood” policies (Ayalew Mengiste, 2018; Velasco & Jimenez, 2024; Suber, 2024).

For many migrants and facilitators, smuggling functions as a *survival strategy* amid structural precarity, inequality, and restrictive migration policies (Achilli, 2024; Richter, 2022; Maher, 2018; Parreñas, 2009). It represents a “makeshift” or “hustle economy” (Vuilleumier, 2024; Lakika, 2024), a way to navigate exclusion and sustain life in the ruins of legality. Smuggling can thus be understood as “protection from below” (Majidi, 2018): an informal form of welfare or mobility infrastructure emerging in response to state violence.

To conceptualise smuggling as *racialised borderwork* is therefore to recognise it as labour—embedded in social reproduction, shaped by affect, and governed by race. It is the work of moving and being moved, of caring, negotiating, protecting, and risking one’s life in systems that render mobility illegal. Borderwork exposes how racial capitalism depends on the differential value of life, where some bodies become expendable labour for the movement of others. Smuggling’s relational, affective, and reproductive labours reveal the underbelly of global mobility: not a world of free movement, but of stratified survival. Not only are materialities of smuggling important to uncover in this study, so too are the blurring of the physical and the metaphysical. Mediated images of border crossings from the media, the state and the humanitarian agencies contribute in framing migration and borders into their own narratives. The next section in this chapter looks at how scholars have theorised and conceptualised irregular migration governance and (online) communication.

Migration Governance, Media and Communications

There is now a vast and interdisciplinary body of literature examining the relationship between migration governance, communications, media and society. The literature is wide spanning sociology, communication studies, political science, and cultural theory. Past scholarship agreed mass media and politicians are the dominant players in shaping public understanding of immigration, influencing policy agendas, and reproducing social and racial hierarchies. But there has been rupture in the media landscape from ICTs, digital technology and social media challenging the media-state hegemony over how borders and migration is communicated (Triandafyllidou and Massari, 2025). Despite media representation from below, reporting of migration in legacy media tends to reflect the concerns of policymakers and report on the public polling and general public attitudes. Recent undercover investigative journalism has started to report emotively on the lived experiences of asylum seekers living in poor accommodation and being smuggled having direct consequences in ad-hoc policy changes (Mitchell, 2024 BBC documentary 'To Catch a Scorpion').

Liberal centred analysis on immigration covered in media reels of 'advanced' economies link migration to wage depreciation, liberalisation of labour market and the cutting of the state welfare (Eberl et al., 2018). Trade deals or visa regimes are frequently linked to economic discourses about "access to new markets" and the "cost-benefit" of whether migrants "contribute more than they take out." At the same time, right wing commentators have instrumentalised the welfare state as a rhetorical weapon, framing asylum seekers as a drain on the public treasury. Such narratives circulate within a broader populist discourse that positions migration as a cultural threat (Maneri, Piccoli, Anselmi, 2023). Nativist tropes of the dangerous other; these racialised subjectivities are in constant circulation across public discourse. In the European context, the demonisation of Eastern

European labour migration has been widely linked to political ruptures such as the Brexit referendum of 2016 (Breazu and McGarry, 2023), where questions of sovereignty, borders, and national identity became crystallised around media-fuelled anxieties.

Firstly, scholars have tackled the interplay between migration governance and media within the securitisation paradigm. Authors have focussed on the visibility of migration as a disciplining effect on the population and reinforce subtly the power of governments and their security institutions. Foucauldian concepts such as *dispositif*, governmentality and master frames such as power-knowledge, discipline and punishment have all been used by scholars to understand communication, society and mobility.

The conceptualisation of people and populations as political bodies of modernity is central to Foucault's theorisation of power and knowledge. This framework contrasts the regulated, disciplined citizenry with unruly caricatures positioned outside the *body politic*, reinforcing knowledge–power discourses as liberal technologies of control (Schwartz, 2024). Delitz (2024) extends this argument by drawing on Foucault's writings on culture and society, showing how processes of exclusion—such as the scientific disciplining of the “madman”—produce subjects deemed dangerous or abnormal, which society seeks to divide, purify, and contain. Similarly, Kreutzer (2015) highlights the importance of Foucault's concept of governmentality for media studies, arguing that orders of knowledge determine what becomes visible or sayable, while prohibiting and excluding the unsayable. In this sense, the analysis of communication, media, and mobility must also attend to the silences, exclusions, and absences that structure what can be represented or spoken about migration and social life (*ibid*). Foucault's insights thus offers partial understanding how media visibility and discourse are implicated in the governance of mobility.

The literary turn in post structuralism looks at the construction of language and communication. There are multiple social scientific works that use discourse analysis, as

an epistemological and methodological positions to uncover how power is enacted through language. For instance, Maneri et al (2011) builds on these ideas to show how migration policy is enveloped in the language of control, where the “enemy” and the “protector” are invoked as key figures in shaping the visibility of migration. Media discourse, he argues, largely reproduces the logics of securitisation embedded in these policies, illustrating how power and knowledge intertwine in constructing migration as a problem of order and threat. Walters and Tazzioli (2016) similarly contend that media visibility is not merely a form of subjection but an “irreducible and constitutive feature of government.” Visibility itself, they argue, operates within “regimes of truth” and becomes a strategic field of governance, particularly in the geographies where migrant routes intersect with state intervention. These sites of visibility are thus transformed into spaces of governmentality—zones where media, power, and mobility converge to shape how migration is seen, known, and governed.

The securitisation paradigm has been covered in the literature as part of the wider politicisation of national security and crime. Didier Bigo’s (2002) notion of the “internal security state”—where security logics permeate civil institutions, including the media—helps explain how migration has been discursively constructed as a security problem. The association of crisis imagery and securitisation, in Gifra (2024) similarly argues that dominant media remain closely aligned with nationalist and securitised perspectives, reinforcing state authority over migration narratives. Juliet Stumpf’s (2006) concept of the “crimmigration” complex captures how the convergence of criminal and immigration law is mirrored in media language, with once-unthinkable terms like “illegal migrant” normalised in public discourse. Empirical findings, such as Brouwer, van der Woude and van der Leun (2017) case in the Netherlands, show how the security-crime nexus mirrors political rhetoric rather than originating independently in journalistic practice. Political

slogans exemplify this productive relationship between media and state performance. Such narratives sustain what they term the “ontological security” of the nation state.

While much research focuses on national media discourse and the nation state, an emerging body of work highlights the transnational and multi-actor dimensions of migration communication (Williams, 2020). Scholars examining migration governance note that media are not simply observers but active instruments of policy and behavioural management (Brandle and Tolochko, 2023). The last decade has seen a burgeoning body of work from discourse analysis scholars examining information and awareness campaigns as a discursive technology of bordering. Campaigns are implemented by international organisations (IOM) and donor states (bilateral development projects) (DeJong, 2017)—illustrate how humanitarianism, development and security logics intertwine in the symbolic regulation of mobility.

Migration-information campaigns (ICs) have become a key policy tool for migration management, especially within EU and IOM programming (Nieuwenhuys and Pécoud, 2007; Musarò, 2019). These campaigns aim to “steer” migration by influencing perceptions and aspirations in countries of origin and transit, frequently under the banner of humanitarian protection (“saving lives,” “raising awareness of risks”). Heller (2014) uses the concept of the ‘media dispositif’ border and migration governance forms complex technological network of mediation to deter future migration in the ‘global south’. In practice, interventions function as new bordering practices, externalising control through the moral vocabulary of care. The International Organization for Migration’s Aware Migrants campaign, for instance, uses testimonies and videos to dissuade would-be migrants from undertaking dangerous journeys, thereby individualising responsibility for risk and depoliticising the structural conditions that produce mobility (Kosnick, 2014; Masarò, 2019). While presented as development-oriented communication, these

campaigns often blur security and humanitarian agendas (Bartels, 2019), normalising what Musarò (ibid) calls a “compassionate repression.” Despite their prominence and generous funding, empirical evaluations consistently show limited or ambiguous impact on actual migration decisions (Tjaden, 2018). Alongside scholarship on securitisation media and state discourse, media and migration governance has been covered from a post colonial, race and state-capitalist perspective.

Firstly, it is worth mentioning, the intersection of media culture and deviance has long been a central concern within media studies. Stanley Cohen’s (2011) foundational study of youth subcultures and media representation introduced the concept of moral panic—a process through which media amplify perceived social deviance to reaffirm dominant moral boundaries. Later, Stuart Hall and colleagues (1986) extended this to examine how media serve as sites of ideological struggle, particularly around race and identity. Hall et al., ‘Policing the Crisis’ (1978) linked media moral panics to the reproduction of racialised threat, showing how news narratives legitimated punitive state responses and shaped public consent for repressive policies. Hall’s conjunctural analysis—understanding specific historical moments as intersections of political, economic, and ideological contradictions—this later became revitalised for analysing the European “migration crisis” coverage and pandemic.

Early media theory offers a useful lens for analysing these dynamics. Robert Entman’s (1993) influential work on framing theory conceptualises how media select certain aspects of reality to make complex issues comprehensible to audiences, assigning moral judgments and causal attributions in the process. Framing, for Entman, is not purely a top-down operation but rather a cultural process involving the interaction of communicator, text, receiver, and broader social context. Earlier, Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge’s (1965) study of foreign news reporting demonstrated how Western media reproduce core–periphery

hierarchies, privileging events and actors culturally proximate to the metropole while marginalising those from postcolonial peripheries—what they termed the “motherland–colony” perspective. Entman (ibid) later echoed this in his claim that new information is typically “fitted into existing mental patterns,” thus reaffirming normative worldviews.

Media has also been interrogated from the perceptive serving the capitalist modes of production. The most influential writer on migration, media and state power from a marxist-post colonial perspective is DeGenova’s (2013) thesis titled the ‘border spectacle’. The state-capital nexus is understood to rely, intensively and extensively, on the instantaneous propagation of mass-mediated public discourse and images. DeGenova draws from the situationists — a 1960s movement headed by Guy Debord’ (1967). This perspective suggests media ‘spectacles’ represent "the totality of new techniques of government" accompanying "the autocratic reign of the market economy," featuring a fusion of state and economy. The central conceptual dichotomy used to analyze the dynamics of migration enforcement is the relationship between the "scene of exclusion" and the "obscene of inclusion” (Zizek, 1997). Thus, mass media is productive in creating illegal subjects (Andersson, 2014) and serves as a supplement to the political economy of cheap migrant labour (De Genova 2002). Khiabany and Williamson (2024) echoes the spectacle without making direct reference to it in a recent article stating how 100s of millions of UK pounds spent by the UK government in securitisation divisions is linked to mediated English Channel crossings. Lastly, media spectacles distort the broader issues of racialised subordination and global inequalities (Balibar and Williams, 2002).

Contrary to the determinism of mass media spectacles and securitisation, recent scholarship has started to look into how mobility governs from bottom-up forms of media production, exploring how migrants themselves participate in shaping the visual and communicative politics of migration. Triandafyllidou and Massari (2025) introduces the

concept of “visual migration governance”, arguing that the rise of digital platforms has transformed how migration is seen, narrated, and governed. Four key developments underpin this transformation: first, the decline of legacy media’s hegemony as migrants and refugees generate their own alternative representations; second, the visual turn in communication—driven by smartphone technologies and social media—that enables immediate sharing of self-produced content; third, the algorithmic structuring of visibility, which constrains the apparent openness of digital spaces; and fourth, the blurring of spatial and temporal boundaries, as digital content circulates across local, national, and transnational scales in real time. For Massari (2025), this digital conjuncture challenges the traditional state–media–civil society nexus. Migrants and socio-legally marginalised actors—often excluded from formal political spaces—can now intervene directly in public debate through digital media. These micro-level communicative practices constitute new forms of mediated agency, reconfiguring who can speak and be heard within the field of migration governance. While still shaped by algorithmic and political constraints, such practices nonetheless destabilise hierarchical communication flows, offering openings for more plural, contested, and participatory forms of visual politics.

The work of Anna Triandafyllidou and Alice Massari (2025) speaks to a theoretical framework situated within the broader mobilities paradigm (Urry, 2007) and critical border studies frameworks such as ‘via-politics’ (Campbell et al., 2025; Walters, 2012; Walters, Heller, and Pazzani, 2021). Within this framework, media communications and mobility is not only shaped by the structural forces of displacement and resettlement but also by networking, conviviality, and new communication practices that sustain life in transit (Urry and Elliot, 2010). Trimikliniotis, Parsanoglou, and Tsianos (2015) challenge the ‘techno-pessimism’ that views digital surveillance as an all-encompassing panopticon,

while also recognising that digital control is a persistent reality of contemporary bordering. Proponents of the mobile commons and digitalities literature (ibid) argue that people on the move navigate digital technologies as both instruments of collaboration and tools of evasion against state control. This perspective foregrounds migrant agency by emphasising how digital technologies enable migrants to create community, solidarity, and self-representation. Trimikliniotis, Parsanoglou, and Tsianos (2015, p.9) call for reading the mobile commons as “a collective power to reshape the world of people on the move,” having a revolutionary potential through new forms of digital knowledge and collective organising. Their arguments situate migrant digital practices within a broader field of subaltern struggle, suggesting that the digitalities of subaltern migrants produce counter-narratives to dominant media distortions and create alternative epistemologies “from the vantage points of those so often side-stepped, undervalued or plainly ignored” (ibid).

The digital commons approach discussed here offers a lens through which to examine agency and resistance through digital media. This perspective contests the supremacy of digital securitisation debates and dominant media framings of migration. The authors urge scholars to move beyond technological control, advocating for constructivist and feminist approaches that situate digitality as a dimension of existence and praxis rather than as an external governance tool emanating from FRONTEX ‘control centres’. Misinterpreting digitality as merely a state surveillance apparatus, they argue, obscures the social struggles and class relations unfolding within the digital commons itself (Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013). Building on the autonomy of migration framework, Marino (2021) identifies two strands he terms technologies of exile and technologies of solidarity (digital humanitarianism). The former explores the material conditions and affordances of digital connectivity during the pre-departure, journey, and arrival stages, observing the performative and symbolic dimensions of refugee connectivity. The latter focuses on the “grassroots fringes of society,” particularly the “tech for social good community,” which

uses technology to promote the legal and moral duty to safeguard human life. While Foucault's concepts have often been used to explain media- and state-technology-driven forms of governance associated with Foucauldian securitisation, Galis and Makrygianni (2022) instead examine various digital practices that produce counter-information. Drawing on Foucault's notion of heterotopias, they show how migrants become active agents in shaping the experience of migration and space. The authors demonstrate that digital ICTs can provide migrants with emancipatory spaces of interaction, recognition, and solidarity—relational spaces of fluidity that are always evolving and that challenge the institutional limits of totalitarian control. Thus, digital media becomes a portal and passage into the migrant's own space of othering. In essence, migrants create digital-urban 'heterotopias' as acts of disobedience against "Fortress Europe," using ICTs to configure spaces of rupture, navigation, counter-information, and imagination.

In summary, migration and border governance have been treated from a number of philosophical concepts within the paradigms influential in critical border and migration studies. For instance, media and migration governance has been approached practically as a governance strategy via information campaigns and as an instrumental tool for border crossing. What can be taken away from all of the scholarship included in this section is power and sovereignty is challenged and reinforced through images and frames, and this has multiplied in the digitalities of multiple actors. The information dialectic of migration governance and the state has been approached from the perspective of border crossing and (supra)national sources, while 'smugglers' own influence over governance through their own representations of bordering and routes have still been left untouched in the scholarship on migration governance and media (see chapter 4 and 5).

Perspectives on Migrant Solidarity in Europe

There is an extensive body of literature on migrant solidarity and activism. Given the limited space available here, this review will focus specifically on what is often referred to as border activism. Although not all authors use this exact term, social scientists agree on its core features. The various perspectives and definitions that fall under or adjacent to “border activism” share a common understanding of borders as relational rather than as fixed lines on a cartographic map. As Fernández-Bessa (2019, p.5) puts it ‘to understand bordering as a relational process means acknowledging the social interaction between state and non-state actors who, on the one hand, build, control and reinforce borders, and on the other hand also cross, escape or dismantle them.’ Whether discussed as migrant activism, border activism, migrant solidarity, No Borders activism, or debordering solidarity, the field is conceptually crowded, with overlapping and sometimes competing terminologies. The following section offers a review of the literature and their respective political philosophical underpinnings and the everyday practical implications bearing on pro-migrant social movement political culture in the last two to three decades.

The definitions of ‘border activism’ provided are connected through their shared focus on contesting state power, restrictive regimes, and the traditional limits of citizenship (Fernández-Bessa, 2019). Broadly defined as migrant activism (contesting the global migration regime) (Nyers and Rygiel, 2012) or border activism (collective efforts to modify, mitigate, or dismantle a border regime) (Fernández-Bessa, 2019), these practices are often conceptualized “from below”, centering the agency of refugees and migrants (Mezzadra, 2020; Mezzadra and Neilsen, 2013). This category of activism fundamentally serves as a key site for reconceptualising citizenship by exploring how non-citizens, through acts and claims, “in effect practise citizenship”, leading to the emergence of “political beings and de

facto citizens", a status sometimes referred to as 'activist citizenship' or, conversely, a practice that allows subjects to opt out of citizenship as a mode of resistance (Isin, 2013). This critical approach draws from a materialist perspective, providing a re-think on mobility as 'insurgent citizenship' (Mezzadra, 2011; Papadoupoulous and Tsianos, 2013).

Taking from the Foucaultian idea of knowledge and power, strategically, border activism, is conceptualised by Elias and Stivers (2025, p.207) as counter-conduct and counter-knowledge, characterized as fundamentally democratic resistance to governmental power, where counter-knowledge functions as "counter-action against instrumentally rational bureaucratic business as usual". Specific activist models include civil initiatives (Ambrosini, 2023), which insists that activists are upholding refugee law against state violations (Andrijasevic and Walters, 2010), and internationalist praxis (Trimikliniotis and Tsianos, 2024) which fuses humanitarian and political pressures to challenge policies forcing flight (Perolini, 2023) or deportation regimes (Kemp, 2024; De Genova, 2002). Furthermore, organisations sometimes describe their work as Non-Governmental Action (NGA) or 'No borders' to signify a deliberate activist and political intent that resists the idea of purely technical humanitarian intervention (Mezzadra, 2020; Mezzadra and Neilsen, 2013). These forms of action are conceptualised as 'border struggles' and political resistance outside of representative democracy of activist elites in the NGO and lobby sector. These are mobilisations with an internationalist praxis that see the structural violence of 'migrant struggles' as de facto citizen struggles, border protests, and institutional border activism (Fernández-Bessa, 2019), all aimed at the ambitious long-term objective of achieving a politics of freedom of movement, or 'No Borders' (Mezzadra, 2020).

Since the long summer of migration in 2015, across Europe there was a flourishing of grassroots initiatives, coupled with a new found of activism(s) and scholarship on this

phenomenon followed (Ambrosini, 2023). Many scholars have attempted to define this explosions by its perceived organic, 'grassroots' character in the absence of the state and international humanitarian agencies. Scholarship has focussed efforts on defining the blossoming of solidaritarian mobilisations as 'migrant solidarity struggles' (Birey et al., 2019); with others pointing to the voluntaristic nature of social interventions as 'volunteer humanitarianism' (Sandri, 2017) or 'solidarity humanitarianism' (Rozakou, 2017) and focus on the grassroots character of solidarity interventions (Mcgee and Pelham, 2018; Breznec et al., 2016). Cantat (2021, p.1359) underlines the international 'itinerant volunteerism and activism' of networks. As picked up in DeBono and Mainwaring (2020), grassroots tend to be resistant to the political and social regimes in which they operate. At times unmatched political power and operating in a hostile socio-cultural and political environment, grassroots are framed as being part of wider political and social movements (della Porta, 2020). Grassroots initiatives have been theorised across a continuum practical-humanitarian as well as a contentious-political element³⁵ in their political cultures, albeit this dichotomy does not reflect empirical cases which demonstrate hybridity (della porta and Steinhilper 2022).

There is also scholarship that contends with the amount of autonomy from state capture or professionalisation, questioning the praxis of NGOs, civil society organisations, associations, and activists (Ahasan and Gardner, 2016; Lang, 2021) . A vast array of grassroots actions has been situated along the continuum between 'humanitarianism' and political 'solidarity' (Dadusc and Mudu, 2020; Tazzioli and Walters, 2019). Numerous civil society organisations supporting refugees and asylum seekers have begun to reflect critically on their practices—calling into question humanitarianism as a colonial

³⁵ Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) is an umbrella network of NGOs and activist contribute in collecting testimonies on pushbacks and border violence. Davies, Isakjee and Obradović-Wochnik (2021) termed this type of grassroots political action as 'epistemic friction'. The concept helps to illustrate its militant methodology to produce alternative knowledge from the voices of those experiencing border violence.

continuation and interrogating the political norms underpinning grassroots solidarity (Braun, 2017; Picozza, 2021; Fassin, 2011). Some have gone so far as to argue humanitarian actors become accessories to state policies by softening border closures through compassion or by operating within the neoliberal logic of outsourcing public services to civil society (Fleischmann, 2018). This dynamic ties into the ‘suffering subjectivities’ produced within the politics of care, which have been criticised as anti-political, diverting attention away from the levers of power and the struggle for systemic change (Fassin, 2012). Others highlight how grassroots initiatives can also disrupt the exclusionary categorisations produced by legal regimes (Perolini, 2024) or enact forms of solidarity that transgress state control (DeBono and Mainwaring, 2020). Moreover, humanitarianism functions as an extension of the post-war governance of individual rights (Feldman, 2007), transforming refugees into infantilised ‘pure victims’, ‘muted bodies’, or aliens to be cared for and controlled (Fassin, 2012; 2014; Ticktin, 2014; Rajaram, 2002; Malkki, 1996). The influential work of Didier Fassin’s (2011) postcolonial understanding of humanitarianism has been especially critical in shaping the praxis of migrant activism and solidarity initiatives; the argument being humanitarianism reproduces self-governing individuals and reinforces the colonial mindset of the European who polices the other through care and control.

Despite these critical works adding weight to the complexities of migrant solidarity, the framework ideal-type locates civil society engagement for migrants between the poles of humanitarianism and political solidarity, allowing for the observation of how characteristics—such as frames (e.g., emergency assistance vs. social justice), organization (professionalized vs. grassroots), and interaction with the state (consensus vs. conflict)—blend and shift in response to crises (della Porta and Steinhilper, 2021).

Within this critical landscape, grassroots initiatives remain inherently susceptible to the political climate in which they operate. No group can be entirely autonomous from the power of state-capital antagonisms. Consequently, grassroots actors are constrained by political and institutional and have to adapt to sustain their initiatives (ibid). What often emerges is a tension facing ‘citizen humanitarian’ initiatives: resisting institutionalisation or embracing professionalisation for efficacy (Jambert and Pascucci, 2021). These groups initially emerged to fill the gaps left by states and established NGOs, valuing agility, informality, and proximity to ‘beneficiaries’. However, sustaining long-term operations requires organisational professionalisation to gain credibility, legitimacy, and access to funding (Boswell and Badenhop, 2020), thus risking the erosion of their grassroots ethos. According to Jambert and Pascucci (2021), some organisations have balanced this conundrum by professionalising administrative tasks while maintaining a volunteer-based identity, while others have pursued formalisation to navigate state demands—often at the cost of internal conflict and ideological compromise. Ultimately, these groups negotiate between structural efficiency and the flexible, non-hierarchical spirit central to what the authors term ‘citizen humanitarianism’ (ibid).

There are political movements which were part of the ‘crisis’ response in 2015, in a long tradition of anti-border politics in Europe. Their actions and politics do not play into a pro-migrant essentialism(s), and links migrant struggles to an explicitly anti-capitalist, and anti-racist struggles globally. These sets of mobilisations have their place in anarcho-syndacalist and anti-globalisation agendas since the late 90s and previous. Early examples include kitchens and schools, established in places like Lesbos and Athens, utilizing self-organization and consensus decision-making (Walters, 2006). Gaudtitz (2017) whom writes extensively on her participatory activism in the movement frames No Border activists within a ‘solidarity’ movement; a collective struggle for a stateless, classless society—rather than hierarchical ‘help’ or ‘charity’. Moreover the concept of ‘prefigurative

politics' expressed in the action-based research of anarchist David Graeber (2002; 2009) is a main feature of the political culture in No Borders activism. Pre-figurative politics is a conceptual window into the self-organization practices of what democracy is and how it can take other forms — in the form of assemblies. No Borders political culture(s) are engaged in a subtracting of power from the state and capital, thereby aiming to render dominant power structures obsolete (Gauditz, 2017; Naegler, 2018). The 'No Borders' movement has been described as internationalist, trans-nationally networked, diverse in terms of legal status, race, and migration history, and engages in anti-hierarchical practices to critique the nation-state by asserting the freedom of movement for all (Walters, 2006; Tazzioli and Walters, 2019; Gauditz, 2017).

As the literature review has established political 'solidarity' means normatively, what about the empirical findings from scholars that have interrogated the everyday practices of solidarity across European borders. For instance, solidarity is an amorphous concept and can be (im)practical depending on the setting. For instance many scholars claim solidarity is linked to the making of 'autonomous spaces' that provide everyday safety, dignity, and agency for migrants in transit or limbo (see Milan and Pirro, 2018; Milan 2020; 2025 for Solidarity across routes). Along the French-Italian Alpine border, practices are structured by mobile infrastructures of solidarity that challenge containment (Tazzioli, 2021). These include mountain rescue efforts based on a collective humanitarian duty, providing temporary refuges, medical and legal support, and organising patrols (*maraudes solidaires*) to find migrants in distress (*ibid*). In Greece, solidarity spaces like the self-managed City Plaza and Lesvos Solidarity enact six counter-constructions of safety: organisational autonomy, radical democracy, spatial liberty, social community, personal dignity, and physical safety (Mitchell and Sparke, 2018). These supposedly 'anti-neoliberal' spaces prioritise cohabitation and self-management, offering migrants the chance to

accumulate social and emotional capital and gain a sense of control over their lives (Gauditz, 2017). In the Canary Islands, the network Somos Red emerged spontaneously after migrants resisted the hotspot system by sleeping in the streets, these forms of subtraction or politics of refusal are met with direct action initiatives (Giliberti and Fravega, 2024). Along the EU's Eastern migratory route, the grassroots initiative Sienos Grupé uses investigative epistemic practices to counter state narratives of erasure (Kekstaite & Vukotić, 2025). Other activist-scholars use the concept of 'epistemic friction' focussing efforts in developing alternative knowledge in the borderlands by conducting reporting strategies and campaigns that develop evidence based research in the advocacy arena as a form of solidarity (Davies, Isakjee and Obradovic-Wochnik, 2021).

The marxist autonomist writers from Greece and Cyprus look at the role of 'subaltern migrants', the precarious and undocumented subjects across a range of spatialities. They root solidarity as "social work from below" or "progressive social work in extremis", emerging when established institutions fail or implement exclusionary policies that generate a "racialised hostile environment" for refugees and asylum-seekers (Trimikliniotis and Tsianos, 2024). This approach functions as a praxis of solidarity, which is not an automatic response but is contingent on socio-political factors, born out of historical struggle, and crucial for "challenging harmful political contexts" (Briskman, 2019). This solidarity is materially sustained through "socialities"—new alliances among diverse groups, including settled migrants, students, workers, and activists—who defy government anti-immigrant rhetoric (Trimikliniotis and Tsianos, 2024). The theoretical foundation of this practice is the mobile commons, which captures these dynamic processes as an "ensemble or matrix of care of the society on the move, generating reciprocity on the move" (Trimikliniotis, Parsanoglou and Tsianos, 2022). What has been termed 'mobile commons' relies on shared knowledge, affective cooperation, mutual support, and care

among mobile populations, which are continuously generated through cooperative actions necessary for survival in precarious spaces (Trimikliniotis and Tsianos, 2024). Ultimately, radical social work is connected to the “reconstruction and reconnection of the fragmentations or disjointed fractures in the specific forms of praxis” sustained by precarious subjects and mobility (ibid, p.195).

Overall, the reviewed literature demonstrates that scholarship on migrant solidarity and border activism encompasses a wide range of theoretical and empirical perspectives. Authors variously conceptualise border activism as a form of migrant or “from below” activism that contests state power, citizenship boundaries, and restrictive migration regimes (Fernández-Bessa, 2019; Nyers and Rygiel, 2012; Mezzadra, 2020). A number of contributions draw on Foucauldian and materialist frameworks to frame border activism as counter-knowledge and democratic resistance to governmental power (Elias and Stivers, 2025), while others emphasise the practical and political dimensions of grassroots initiatives that emerged during and after the 2015 “long summer of migration” (Birey et al., 2019; Cantat, 2021).

Debates within the literature have increasingly focused on the continuum between humanitarianism and solidarity, questioning the extent to which grassroots actors reproduce or resist dominant power structures (Dadusc and Mudu, 2020; Tazzioli, 2019). Critical interventions informed by postcolonial perspectives (Fassin, 2011; Feldman, 2007) have examined how humanitarian practices risk reinforcing colonial logics and depoliticising migration struggles, while others highlight the capacity of grassroots initiatives to disrupt exclusionary legal and social categories (Perolini, 2023; DeBono and Mainwaring, 2020). Scholars have also explored tensions between informality and professionalisation within “citizen humanitarianism,” demonstrating how grassroots

actors navigate institutional constraints while seeking to preserve their political ethos (Jambert and Pascucci, 2021; Land and Badenhoop, 2025).

In parallel, radical and internationalist approaches, often associated with the “No Borders” movement, locate solidarity within broader anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and feminist struggles (Walters, 2006; Gauditz, 2017). These perspectives link solidarity to practices of autonomy, mutual aid, and collective self-organisation, positioning it as an alternative to hierarchical forms of humanitarian aid. Empirical studies across Europe further document the local enactments of solidarity—from counter-archival work and mobile infrastructures of care to self-managed spaces and “social work from below”—illustrating how solidarity is materialised in everyday encounters and through militant evidence based advocacy reporting (Davies, Isakjee and Obradović-Wochnick, 2021; Mitchell and Sparke, 2018; Tazzioli, 2019; Trimikliniotis and Tsianos, 2024). Taken as a whole, this body of work reflects the diversity and internal tensions of migrant solidarity and border activism scholarship. It reveals ongoing debates around autonomy and co-optation, political consciousness and professionalisation, and the shifting boundaries between humanitarian care and political resistance.

Conclusion: Research Gaps

Across the literatures reviewed, several empirical gaps emerge that this study seeks to address. First, the dominant approaches in critical border and migration studies—particularly those influenced by Foucault and the Autonomy of Migration, have offered vital insights into the relational dynamics of power, control, and agency. These frameworks often remain detached from the longer histories of race and imperialism underpinning the European border regime. With limited exceptions (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; De Genova, 2013; Augustová, 2023; Isakjee et al., 2020), the racialised foundations of European sovereignty and capital, and its continuation in exploiting labour of dispossessed

and exploited remain peripheral to analyses of mobility and bordering (exception recent work from Bird and Schmidt, 2023; Landherr, 2024). Consequently, the economies that sustain life along the Balkan Route—smuggling, informal work, and humanitarian infrastructures—are rarely examined as racialised forms of labour embedded within wider forms of accumulation. By working with racial capitalism as a theoretical frame into the everyday social worlds of European borders and routes, this thesis seeks to accompany previous approaches (securitisation and autonomy), situating the work of smuggling and petty economies along the balkan route as deeply embedded in broader processes of accumulation, differentiation, and dispossession.

While this study is not exclusively a study of informal economy, equally where there is economic activity there are social and cultural life (what Marx would have termed the superstructure). Thus, literatures on migration governance, communications and media reveals both analytical promise and conceptual fragmentation into the socialities and digitalities that exist along the route. Cultural, security and solidarity studies have focused extensively on securitisation narratives, postcolonial frames, spectacles as ideologically and economically productive. Emphasis on mass media exposing how visual and discursive regimes construct migrants as threats or victims has been the preoccupation of critical border and migration theorists. However, migrants' digital practices and communicative agency produce representations of borders and routes from below, illustrating how migrant digitalities both shape and are entangled with contemporary regimes of border governance. Theorizations of 'mobile commons and digitalities' (Trimikliniotis, Parsanoglou, and Tsianos, 2015) provides a useful corrective, positioning digital media as a terrain of social reproduction, connectivity, and counter-narrative. Until now empirical studies of these practices remain sparse for how border workers, particularly along the Balkan Route, approach digital worlds, how they communicate socialities, materialities

and solidarities. Filming and narrative of those crossing borders, not only movement but also forms of life and labour of those situated at the borders.

Although not exclusively about economy and culture, research on border activism and solidarity across Europe's borders continues to grapple with the tension between humanitarianism and political struggle. Scholarship has identified different periods in which grassroots initiatives spring up and their praxis; national "civil society" (Ambrosini, 2022), and internationalist, class-based dimensions of action (Gauditz, 2017). Concepts such as *prefigurative politics* and *de-bordering solidarity* offer ways to capture practices that refuse the humanitarian–securitarian binary, while their empirical grounding along the Balkan Route remains limited. By foregrounding these actions within a racial-capitalist political economy, this study seeks to understand how solidarity, care, and resistance are produced in and against border regimes of accumulation, linking the everyday labours of survival to wider struggles from border activists in the everyday.

Chapter 3 Methodology

Introduction

As the literature demonstrated there are several key themes to unravel throughout the course of the research. Themes covering political economy, autonomy of migration and border activism are of interest to border and migration studies, social movement, criminology, geography and cultural studies, sociology and anthropology. Yet as the literature review and the empirical chapters demonstrate, these disciplines and themes converge and illuminate one another, in what C Wright Mills termed the ‘sociological imagination’. I have not been pinned down by any strict boundaries of one of a few disciplines. The central theme of the study are economies of transit and the social worlds that are produced— a world within worlds, while emphasising the transient character of borders and routes as spatially transnational and local. To uncover sensitive borderlands the ethnographer must contend with the messy and at times contradictory nature of the actors and the relations to one another that do not fit neatly into binary narratives and practices. For instance, themes that touch on the contradictions of crime and labour, activism and humanitarianism, solidarity and coercion; the border ethnography is caught within a whirlwind of ambivalence, based on relations underpinned by hierarchies of knowledge, power and control.

In each section of this chapter I will narrate some of the everyday encounters during the fieldwork process. First I will enter an abstract discussion on epistemology of The ‘Balkan Route’ its relations to bordering and borders in the global economy more broadly. In the second section I will sketch out my entry into the field whilst zooming into the ‘route’ by mapping the constellation of borderland locations that hug the Schengen border. Third I

will develop the locations and dates of where I conducted fieldwork and contextualise the participant observation, various interview techniques and the challenges posed in researching dynamic political and social border contexts. Fourth, I will discuss the digital world of smuggling TikTok and Facebook accounts and the digital communications that intersect with the physical ethnography. Fifth, I will explain the data analysis and reflexivity in the analytical phase of the research process. Lastly I will reflect on my positionality and outline ethical considerations.

Epistemology of 'The Balkan route'

Various places and geographies feature heavily in this study, forming the narratives of migrants, activists, the state authorities both through their everyday practices, and constructed narratives and discourses. In the world of policy-makers and politicians in Bruxelles to the Governmental and non-governmental organisations and agencies, 'The Balkan Route'³⁶ is treated as politically productive for externalisation policies and thus a researchable unit of analysis for researchers. Hess and Kasperek (2022, p.186) write in 'Via-Politics: Borders, Migration and the Power of Locomotion' (edited by Walters, Heller and Pezzani, 2022):

"the epistemology of the migratory [Balkan] route emerged as a new governmental gaze and rationale in which the Balkan Route of the previous decades played a pivotal role....New governmental geopolitical modes were not simply theoretically constructed. Rather, they emerged precisely at the advent of an EU migration and border regime and in its encounter with a particular instance of migration, which twenty years ago had already been captured and had been made visible as an object of governance by the term Balkan Route."

³⁶ EU Agencies like FRONTEX, Nation states, and non-gov humanitarian agencies International Organisation for Migration (IOM)

Hess and Kasperek (2022, *ibid*) draw from their genealogical analysis of the route — an ‘objects of state governance and knowledge production of the emerging EU migration and border regime.’ The route emerges as the seemingly simplest of epistemological devices, the Balkans had always been othered by Europe (esp, since 1990s civil war), full of ‘dangerous places now turn into dangerous routes’ (Dietrich, 1999 cited in Hess and Kasperek, p.197).

From a governance perspective, Balkan route is a passage into Europe’s economic and political core(s) and a passage that must be controlled³⁷. Irregular border crossings are intercepted by a range of state bordering practices (forcible movement, cross border pushbacks and internal pushbacks, and ad-hoc imprisonment). This has created a circular migratory patterns, rather than a linear ‘formalised corridor’ seen in 2015-16 (Speer, 2017; Stojic-Mitrovic and Valencia, 2019). In as much as the ‘Balkan Route’ is a politicised construct, it has equally been internalised by people on the move as a geographical terrain one must traverse if they are to reach ‘EUrope’ (see. Zocchi, 2023 on the ‘the game’).

But this is not only a story of European border protectionism in securing the freedom of movement for European citizens at the expense of non-EU passport holders (Balibar, 2003), it is also a capital intensive system of racialised discrimination and imperial continuation (Walia, 2013). This is what Harvey (1981) calls the ‘spatial fix’, firstly, here lies along the route the intensification of security capital in the form of transit camps, border fences, border personnel, and other materials. Second, the build up of immobile people creates the circulation of capital from migrants, smugglers, international NGOs, grassroots and local economies that make social, economic and political ‘capital’ from the ‘politics of immobility’. Thus different spatial scales of the route must be taken into

³⁷ A policy position that has been accelerated in scale and resources since the EU-Turkey agreement in 2016

consideration — not only as a supranational political governance tool but also a global industry of class war and erosion of global democracy (Bhattacharaya, 2024).

In light of the ‘spatial fix’ of capital expenditure this concept developed by Harvey is central to the framework of ‘racial capitalism’. State bordering for Bhattacharaya (2024) is one of many “processes that distribute populations into racialised categories and racialised opportunities as part of the process of accumulation” (ibid, p.3). In this study, front and centre, these categories and opportunities are uncovered from the perspective of everyday material practices of ‘border work’ (Rumsford, 2008). At the borders, global racism and capitalist expansion are intensified in the everyday practices — ‘biography, memory, discourse, sensory experience, materiality, sociality’ — of the actors that maintain and undermine European border regimes (I.e ‘The Balkan Route’) (Pink; 2012, p.21; Bhattacharaya, 2024).

Mapping the Field and Choosing the Site(s)

My introduction to the research field had already taken place when I spent three months involved in ‘border activism’ from October 2020 to December 2020, in West Vojvodina. I already had a map of the different sites I was able to conduct research over long periods of time with organisations based close to the borders. Considering I was lucky enough to be awarded with a 4-year scholarship, it gave me time to conduct a 1-month field trip across the West Balkan region during the first year of the programme. The idea was to have a refreshed understanding of the challenges facing migrants crossing borders and the activists supporting them with humanitarian aid and conducting border violence reporting. My immediate rapport with NGOs and No Border activist groups in the region made choosing the setting for the research relatively simple. On the whole, I was welcomed by the permanent members of the organisation, because of the good relations I had built with

them since 2020. The only challenge was building rapport with the individual teams based at each location. From previous experience and during fieldwork teams can put constraints on access, sometimes acting as gatekeepers, while on the other hand, they can be co-producers in collaboration with the research process (Boccagni, 2011). The only comfort I was the support of the 'no Borders' organisations permanent members. Their evidenced based approach to activism (border violence reporting) and their flexibility to accommodate was reassuring and supportive space for researchers.

When selecting the setting(s) for the study, in this case which border geographies to cover, I was aware of the fluctuations in state bordering practices that can change the complexion of the field site within weeks. Taking this into account, the bordering strategies of the state cannot be down to policy alone. Bordering regimes are entangled within historical trajectory and the social relations of the political economy (Moctar, 2023), thus border geographies and places have long term trends, while also prone to fluctuations in government policy or global external factors, such as global pandemics³⁸. For instance the numbers of people crossing one part of the route can switch to another within a few months, depending on a large number of variables that are impossible to measure. What the study did benefit from in this short re-introduction to the field was what Galser and Strauss (1967) argue as 'theoretical sampling', based on previous ethnographies that had been conducted in the region, I was looking for possible gaps and new developments that may not have been covered in recent scholarship. The trip gave me a broader set of cases to compare and contrast in order for potentially under researched empirical findings and theoretical insights (ibid).

³⁸ Covid-19 changed the course of the mobility along the route from primarily travelling through Bosnia, then switching to mostly travelling through northern Serbia between 2021-2023.

Rather than a pilot study, the one month field trip acted as a mapping exercise; making reference to geography across ‘the balkan route’. In each location, I took notes on each border geography — political and social context, migrants crossing, number of squats, policing measures and levels of criminalisation, activist strategies and practice, human smuggling activity, number of cases of border violence, types of violence, by whom etc. This allowed me to re-evaluate research questions, and what units of analysis were integral to answering the emerging questions (Ismail, Kinchin, Edwards, 2017). Although this initial 1-month findings proved fruitful I would later find out exploring the human experience of irregular migration and state bordering requires a flexible method (Creswell, 2012).

Mapping The Route and the Borders (Summer 2022)

The trip started from Italy to Zagreb, then by bus to the first Bordertown stop in the border canton of Una Sana. Here lies two prominent places in the recent EU-West Balkan bordering history. First is Bihać, where I would eventually spend several months in the winter, spring and summer of 2024. In 2022, the town was relatively quiet, although there were visibly people on the move, seemingly relaxed in the park in the July sun, saving their energy before heading north westwards to Croatia or after being pushed back the previous night. After one week I took a 1.5 hour bus ride along the windy road that snakes along the Croatian border to the next border town further north to Velika Kladusa (VK). Before my arrival to VK, the small town was a major migration hub in the years until the transit camp named Miral was closed in May 2022, only months before I arrived. But there were far more migrants staying in VK compared to previous years, according to Arshad Isakjee (co-supervisor) whom had spent the last three years visiting the camps and town for research.

My next stop was a long journey to the town of Šid, where I previously spent three months in 2020. It was an opportunity to catch up with a couple of pals. When meeting the team once we get chatting they mention the names of the squats and the ‘working crew’ that ‘manage’ them. I spent six sweltering days in Šid under the 40c+ heatwave, in late July before moving over to for my first time the art-nouveau city of Subotica. I remember the bus that evening, I was joined by migrants from Afghanistan, all making their way from Belgrade to Subotica. The northern route across Serbia had only just started to build as the new path to take across the balkan route since 2021. As for the NGOs active in the most northernly point of Serbia, there was an international grassroots NGO of volunteer doctors that had been established in Subotica for roughly a year, and one No Borders grassroots organisation that were only just getting set up in the town where they would spend the next year and three months.

I managed to find a bed at the doctor’s living quarters roughly 3km north of Subotica town. The doctors spent long days, delivering basic first aid to people staying in the squats dotted around the mostly farmer’s fields opposite the Hungarian fence. I was able to build a rough picture of the intense working conditions they were operating within. I was naturally drawn to the social milieux they were describing in great detail. What was particularly interesting to me was the description of certain individuals that seemed to hold power in the squats. I had previous experience of young guys managing squats in the west of Vojvodina, but this was another level of ‘sophistication’; the responsibility, structure, numbers (migrants crossing this section of the route) and frequency (turnover). Squats holding 200+ border crossers requires a team of people able to control and facilitate a crowd of eager and anxious people wanting to ‘make it to EUrope’.

I was drawn to this border dynamic as it did not resemble past experiences in west Vojvodina, nor match the stories that were coming out of Bosnia in the previous years (or was under reported) (see. Isakjee et al., 2019). The contextual detail bore no resemblance to the other geographies in 2022. With these stories swirling around in my mind, the chaos they described was made tangible when I crossed the 'Horgoš 2' border crossing on my final day before heading back to Italy. I saw maybe 100 or more people squatting in the old Yugoslavian service station buildings. The stories from the doctors, media reports in the press and the scale and frequency of people crossing this stretch of the border made me want to return as soon as possible. After developing my risk assessments, country sheets, ethics and consent forms and negotiated a start date with the department I would make my return to north Vojvodina, Serbia in May 2023.

Multi-Sited Ethnography and Participant Observation

This study spans across both the physical and digital domain of 'the balkan route'. Firstly this study consists of multiple sites across the route. The research design swings from Vojvodina, Serbia in the east to Una Sana Canton, Bosnia in the west, during the course of my fieldwork period (May 2023 - November 2024) (see. Map Below). What at first seemed like a disaster, made the research design dynamic and fluid. I was following my research participants, and gaining access to multiple different international NGOs and 'no borders' organisation that were doing similar humanitarian and political actions and practices, whilst finding contextual difference within the groups and in the environment they were active.



Map showing the geographical locations of Una Sana Canton in Bosnia and Vojvodina in Serbia. The highlighted regions indicate the areas where the research was conducted.

From the perspective of the social and cultural anthropologist, a multi-sited ethnography unsettles the scientific rigour of the classic ‘Malinowski village’ single site. On the other hand, by following my research participants, I was making connections among sites along the routes and multiple paths that conjoin the route (Marcus, 1998). Even within the single site, as Candea (2007, p.181) argues, will only ‘ever be a window into complexity, and never a holistic entity to be explained’, and so this study does not claim to cover the whole of the ‘Balkan Route’, rather it is a ‘window’ or snapshot of how the route is connected amongst a constellation of sites that make up the ‘whole’. I simply entered a phase in the route’s recent political and social history (see, El-Shaarawi and Rasza, 2018 for a conceptualisation of phases) which seemed to swing like a pendulum from one set of borders and routes to another.

Vojvodina, Serbia (May — August 2023, November 2023 — June, 2024)

The analogy of the ‘spaghetti junction’³⁹ is one way to describe the north of Serbia in 2023. Multiple routes starting in north Africa, central and West Asia, met and then squeezed like a tube of toothpaste through the borderlands of Vojvodina and over the border fence crossing into Hungary or Croatia. The metaphor of a traffic interchange invokes an infrastructure; various actors and institutions intensified into one area. Smuggling networks were a prominent part of the daily activities in the north. An ambivalent and precarious alliance of state authorities and smuggling ‘support’ systems sharpened the temporality of mobility (Keshavarz and Khosravi, 2022). Smuggling networks and the policing measures in the north acted as the levers of ‘scale, speed, place, and time’ (Keshavarz, 2024, p.16). Thus this made it very challenging to develop deeper connections with people on the move, because the mobility was temporary and the stresses and strains of working life in the ‘spaghetti junction’ had very little time or desire to talk to a researcher.



Spaghetti Junction (Graverly Hill interchange, Birmingham, England)

³⁹ Spaghetti Junction is one highway junction in the middle of the country which connects the main highways in the united Kingdom. The junction in peak hours is often jammed with cars, all traversing each others paths to splinter off to their desired destinations.

It was the most frequented section of the route, with all the other geographies very quiet during this period, especially Bosnia, according to my co-supervisor, Dr Arshad Isakjee whom was visiting Bihać and Sarajevo in the summer of 2023. Our days would be totally consumed by the high demand for food, clothes, camping gear (tents, sleeping bags etc.), shoes. The most time consuming days were taken up with 'shower distros' that took 4-6 hours to complete, with 50 or more people taking a shower in one session. The mobile shower system consisted of a 1000 cubic litre water tank and heating pump system all neatly set up in the back of the Transit van (Romanian number plates). The distribution was the only way to make contact with people. It required us to take the van everyday to squats and encampments across dotted near lake palic, farmlands of Horgos and Vitaminka, to the woodlands of Kelebija, and further west we would visit daily another 'ecosystem' of squats outside Sombor town and near Apatin village, closer to the Croatian border. The reason we had to travel such distances was because the police had a low tolerance for anyone that outside of the custody of the transit camp, or in a designated squat run by the border workers.

Most of the time I would be in a team of 3, sometimes up to 5 people out of a team of 7 or 8 depending on the period or whether we had visitors (donations, filmmakers, photographers and other projects based loosely on migration and borders). We were always present during distribution with the doctors NGO whom were always in a team of three or four doctors and one coordinator. Each location had its own characteristics; Factory squat was the largest with 200+ inhabitants, mainly people passing after a few days, while on the other end of the scale, an encampment situated deep into the woodland, never had more than 8 people staying in the encampment and we never saw the same people on the move twice (I visited once per week in the months of July and August).

I spent my time working inside two organisations and worked closely with the doctors NGO on a daily basis. Each organisation had different approaches to distribution with one having a more managerial approach to how one conducts themselves with migrants, while the other ‘no borders’ groups centres radical forms of care and solidarity underpinned by a policy that does not restrict you from developing interpersonal connections (more on this in chapter 6). Rules, conducts, and how they are interpreted by coordinators has a profound effect on my (researcher’s) ability to collect specific types of data. For instance, arranging interviews with migrants would have to be clarified by field coordinators, and interview materials would have to be vetted before conducting the interview. First of all, the context was very challenging people were coming and going within hours, maximum a couple of days. Second, at the time, squats were not always safe — it was rarely appropriate to conduct semi-structured interviews. I was able to get round this issue by approaching people in an informal way and follow up the conversation with note taking and staying in contact for an interview to be arranged in the future.

By the time I had returned to the of north Serbia on the 9th November 2023, there had been a major counter-smuggling operation two weeks prior to my return. There was much speculation from the activist based in the north as to when, not if, there would be a return of movement northwards. Alas, there was never a return, camps were closed down, smuggling crews re-structured and started to operate in Bosnia. Despite experiencing a ‘crisis’ moment, I would keep the apartment in Subotica as my base in the region, whilst I visited three other sites (Sid, Serbia; Sijenica and Tutin, Serbia; and the Una Sana Canton, Bosnia) from November 2023 till August 2024. In the spirit of the social anthropologist James Clifford (1997, p.8), tracing flows and connections across space and time, when the object is mobile and spatially dispersed, the ethnographer acts accordingly, and accepts

“fieldwork as travel practice...research sites of anthropology change in response to geopolitical shifts”.

In the late autumn of 2023 people had been relocated into transit camps further west (near the Bordertown of Šid⁴⁰) and south of the country (Tutin, Sijenica, Pirot, Presevo, Obrenovac), and I started to follow them. I found myself moving in the same direction as the route in real-time. I would make the most of my freedom to move by visiting activists based inside Vojvodina. I took one trip to Šid on the 4th of December, to conduct interviews with activists and take field notes of the situation for people living in the transit camp and squats. The activist group I was shadowing made trips to deliver material goods (clothing and camping gear) and health services outside Adasevci camp and other squats dotted next to the Croatian border 6-days per week. After the Christmas break, I would return to Serbia to make another trip to Šid for two weeks in early February 2024 on my way to the north western tip of Bosnia where most of migrant populations at this time were entering the Schengen zone. Northern Serbia became impossible to cross and two out of the three NGOs still there with nothing to do, were still contemplating whether to stay or relocate several months after, one was still located in the north after one year of the counter-smuggling operation.

Una Sana Canton, Bosnia (Periods: February — April 2024, June — August 2024, October — November 2024)

With the northern part of Serbia turned into a 'no-go zone' for migrants fitting a certain racial profile since late October 2023, the Una Sana Canton (Bihać and Velika Kladuša)

⁴⁰ The camp was full and over capacity. One migrant actually walked me into the transit camp, the security was nowhere to be seen. He showed me inside one of the temporary tents that contained 20-30 beds

became the next borderland next to the Schengen to cross. Thus an ‘informal corridor’ of migrants started moving westwards to and eventually through Bosnia (Minca and Jordan, 2023). Migrants would end this phase of their journey at another pinch-point at the Croatian border. The Una Sana canton historically had been the epicentre of movement until people started to arrive in greater numbers following a ‘post-covid boom’ to north Serbia in 2021. ‘The route’ in the winter of ’23-24 had swung back to Bosnia’s most north westerly territory. Local journalist kept reminding me during conversations that “this had happened before” and ethnographic accounts from Augustova-Benghellab’s thesis (2021) journals how she had to change course during fieldwork (in 2018, from Serbia to Bosnia).

In the period following the last days of Serbia (late October 2023), activists and migrants were less likely to be criminalised in Bosnia. This meant days and nights were less centred around policing methods and working crew power dynamics in squats and encampments. There was less visible organisation in the town and camps⁴¹, plus we were moving into the winter months and people were deciding to stay for longer periods in the camp or squatting in the town. The weather slows migration, plus getting passed Croatian border police felt like an impossibility (see the seasonal effects of border management in Benghellab, Davies and Isakjee, 2025). Previously, it had taken people a few days to pass northern Serbia with a working crew it was now taking migrants without the means to pay for smugglers, multiple attempts to successfully cross into Croatia and Serbia. Moreover, pushbacks were conducted by Croatian police, according to some testimonies, pushbacks started as far as Zagreb. The slower pace of mobility, although frustrating for migrants, made it easier to build rapport with some of the men and boys stuck in the town. This was the period when I first came across young men from Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. These men were mainly stuck with little money or resources to cross the Bosnian-Croatian. My

⁴¹ I would later collect testimonies in the summer of a working crew that developed coercive means to extract money from people

team made a schedule where we would make a daily evening distributions to the bus station where the ‘regulars’ congregated every evening.

When I returned in the summer months (June - August, 2024), people were moving more freely, but Croatian pushbacks were persistent. In the summer months Bihać town provided a lively and seemingly tolerant public sphere for the men squatting in the town⁴². The central park was somewhere activist and groups of migrants would socialise throughout the day and sometimes into the night. I would spend time at an international NGO managed by local staff and shadow one of the previous ‘No Borders’ activists that had switched to a coordinator role for a grassroots doctors NGO. She was alone and needed assistance whilst she was getting the project set up, so I joined her during squat visits where basic first aid was conducted.

In the morning and day I would spend time at the international NGO in the centre of town roughly less a kilometre from the ‘family camp’. The local staff members ran every week day, a day centre where young migrants could cook, and help themselves with a selection of clothes, I remember a large selection of football shirts donated to the organisation, this went down well with the Moroccan youths. This gave young men and families a moment to breath outside the formal spaces of the camp. One of the locals had personal experience as a refugee during the civil war years⁴³. She always displayed huge amounts of empathy and patience towards energetic group of young men and adolescent boys that at the best of times were a handful.

⁴² see. Zocchi (2022) documents a much more complicated EU border regime that stokes tension between Bihać residents —muslim majority— and Arab migrant populations

⁴³ the population of Bihać suffered a three year siege. Some fled before the siege

On the whole, the place was appreciated by the young men as not only a place to eat and socialise but a place to come during a crises. I met multiple groups that were taking temporary refuge at the centre after being pushed back the previous evening, groups would enter the centre completely exhausted and visibly shaken. With the horrors, devastation and exhaustion experienced from a pushback, at least 5-days per week the young men and boys were guaranteed a meal of chicken, spices, and cooked vegetables at the centre. Here I would sit in to supervise the kitchen, providing me with access to a trusted space, where the mostly Moroccan contingent could drop into the centre, it was a way to stay informed on the latest latest 'stories' from the borderlands. The men and boys would share stories of their ordeal crossing borders, their life and situation back in Morocco, and their future dreams of making it to EUrope.

Digitalities of the Balkan Route

In border and migration studies great emphasis has been given to the state's own digitalisation of border controls (biometrics, digital databases shared between international and national police forces and supranational agencies FRONTEX), on the other hand, the use of social media accounts by smugglers has been overlooked. Adding another layer of complexity to the seeing the 'the Balkan route' as something that is communicated visually via video is an under researched phenomenon. Rather than a traditional desk-based observer approach to the content, I found myself spanning across the social environments featured in the video (Urbanik and Roks, 2020).

The qualitative methodology uses digital observations with social media (TikTok and some partly on Facebook profiles and community pages) a multiplication of the field site (meta-field). In the digital world of human smuggling content, the videos and still montages contextualises everyday and extraordinary moments and events along routes and borders

while showing mundane moments of life at the borders and routes. Smuggling content ranged from having an explicitly economic function — advertising services, to smuggling ‘crews’ resembling traditional street gang performances and sub-textual messaging (see. Conquergood, 1994 for performance studies and gangs). The following features of human smuggling content are considered in this study: individual profiles have a specific sub-culture, often consisting of rituals and symbols conveying social identity intersect as a branding exercise. Moreover some of the crews communicated violence and solidarity within the situated spaces they controlled in the north of Serbia and Bosnia. The working crews in the videos are mostly videos of the men (and boys) on the frontline ‘doing the dirty work’ of smuggling. Some of the men were people I would on occasions meet during distributions, and nearly all had been socialised into an ontology of borders and state violence. As the violence in Vojvodina grew, videos developed by the crews communicated their online identities through inter and intra-crew performances that reflected their social and material bordered existence (see Pyrooz et al., 2015 for digital and offline identities and see Patton et al., 2016 for ‘the digital street’ — blurring online and physical space).

To initiate the process of digital observation, broad key terms were typed into the search bar. Since the crews were operating in certain countries along the route, I started with number of the crew and the name of the nation state they were operating (e.g. [crew name] + [country])⁴⁴. Similar to Lambrechts (2025) study on TikTok content on street gangs in Cape town, once the ‘correct search terms’ are entered into the application’s search bar, profiles with the numbers and characters I search with could be found without restrictions or privacy settings.

⁴⁴ upon the advice given to me by an activist in May 2023

After these initial searches, I started to pick up on crew names and numbers, as prominent crews that operated in the two countries. The crew would explicitly show the locations and with wild or agricultural landscapes the crews would include country flags and other emojis indicating places where they were operating. The sample pool of videos selected for this study were based on 27 videos, collected between May 2023 and May 2024, archived by taking screen videos on a mobile device. I spent roughly 30 minutes and up to two hours per day in the digital field, especially during fieldwork periods (over the period 2023-2024). During this period and subsequently, visits to the digital field have been made, not only as an ethnography of the crew videos, but also as a visual representation of the Balkan Route. I was able to track where the route was being travelled and where the crews were operating based on their publicised content.

For the algorithm to produce only smuggler related content, I created a new TikTok account, using an anonymous username. The account does not need to 'like' and 'follow' others for the algorithm to suggest related posts to smuggling. TikTok's algorithm automatically provides the user with specific content through the 'For You' function in the application. This function is based on a complex statistical calculation, which identifies the user's responses to various items (based on the searches). Gerbaudo (2024, p.2) claims TikTok's 'For You' function is 'transforming the social form of online publics.' Moreover instead of seeing online communities connected via a set of networks, TikTok's algorithm creates 'social interest clustering'. For this reason, the sampling framework is impossible to control. I chose content that related to locations and references to the 'Balkan route'. Most of the material chosen for the study, communicated places, people and smuggling groups related to the physical ethnography.

As an example of the real world and digital space blurring, two of the main working crews that communicated publicly on the app emulated an open forum — the online worlds they entered was another way of communicating to each other their adversarial relations. Activists on the other hand, passively engaged with the content to inform themselves on the ongoing ‘saga’ in the north of the country which also included real-time footage of inter-crew violence, police evictions, police operations and internal pushbacks from working crew profiles. Although my engagement was passive and covert (see. Holt, 2020) on passive digital ethnography when studying gangs), I would ask questions during interviews from people involved in smuggling and from people that were smuggled to give me their general reflections of smuggling content. It bears mentioning here smuggling crew content was common knowledge to all research participants I interviewed. I found the videos I was watching represented some of the narratives I was hearing and seeing in the physical spaces during fieldwork.

Questions over the materials authenticity were sometimes reflected upon. As with online street gang material, not all the content can be accepted on face value (Lambrechts, 2025). Some of the content was recycled, thus the date it was published was not the same date as to when the footage was taken. In other videos the content’s authenticity was questionable. Most footage were clearly real moments of border interaction with border personnel and fences. Authenticity could be triangulation with narratives from workers, activist and migrants real life stories and experiences that reflected the content.

There are a few points to make on stylistic choices of smuggling content. Almost every video featured raw footage of life, labour and movement across the Balkan route, although some videos took advantage of the filter functions built into the application. Some of the filters obscured the realities of the raw footage, thus turning the content into a more

stylised production, sometimes verging on psychedelia, whilst many were very much raw footage depicting the environment of the working crew at the borders. All content contained music soundtracks and sound effects, rarely (2 videos during the entire digital ethnography) was the original audio left in the video, adding an audio experience (see. Sheelagh Brady's, 2022 PhD thesis on audio visual cues by non-state actor video content). Other material explicitly intended to show the realities of crossing borders: the border workers tools; border materiality (fences, drones, border personnel); fast paced interchanges from one vehicle to another, all conveying a real time moment of being smuggled through the labour of the workers involved in human smuggling.

Semi-Structured Interviews (N.32)

Migrant interviews (N.11)

The semi-structured interview I conducted when it came to migrants was asking them about their life story. This was a relatively easy way of starting the interview in a less structured and rigid approach. Morawaska (2018, p.119) is in favour of oral histories is one interview technique to 'put the interviewees at ease and provides researchers with valuable information regarding the basic facts about, and important events in, the respondent's lives'. I was able to link their life stories around the irregular movements of the Balkan route. Semi-structured interviews were never delivered in the same order and themes changed, but generally, I attempted to steer a linear interview as a way of keeping track on covering all the necessary themes I intended to cover during the interview. I asked questions that covered a range of themes that would intersect chronologically the migrant's journey across the route from start to the present moment. For instance, if I wanted to explore themes and sub-themes to do with working crew involvement in camps, I would wait until the respondent came to the point where they mentioned a moment in their

itinerary when they arrived at X camp. At this moment, I would start to ask questions related to their experiences in the camp. Of course the linear and chronological method of interviewing described here would often be de-railed and tangential in moments. I would try my best to stay on track covering most of themes in my interview 'theme' guide.

Themes covered in the migrant interviews started with places of origin (their lives and what they were leaving); planning and itineraries (knowledge gained and shared); transiting (survival strategies — 'the game', border violence, incarceration, detention, experiences with smugglers, life in transit camps); working whilst on the move (being the guide, working in Turkey); cultural and media themes (TikTok and Facebook smuggling pages and profiles).

Interview with migrants were taken from young men in their late teens or early 20s, from a mix of backgrounds and heritage: Algeria, Morocco, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Cameroon and Syria. Most of the interviews were taken in English, with one interpreted from Moroccan-arabic to English. The cultural cleavage and power imbalance between me and the respondent should be considered, especially as they were not able to express themselves in their mother tongue. Moreover it limited my research participant selection, as picked interviewees I was able to build rapport with. This trust relied on multiple physical encounters and verbal communications that were otherwise not forged with many potential participants. A large proportion of migrants were not sufficient in English and to my limitations as not speaking in their language.

Activist Interviews (n.14)

I approached the activists in the oral history style, asking what their lives look like outside of the international spaces of border activism. I would also ask questions that linked their

‘normal lives’ to how and why they got involved with the organisation they had been representing, or represented at the time of interview. Interview participants were mainly short term volunteers (maximum 3-months) and coordinators (no.4) across three different organisations. Despite being affiliated with different groups all carried out very similar actions, but contextually different experiences. One group of respondents (N.7) came from X location, whilst another (N.7) came from Y location.

The semi-structured style of the interviews allows for activists to narrate experiences of border activism. The interview was broken into two sections; the private and public sphere. ‘The private’ was the internal affairs of the organisation, the team dynamics and decision making and approaches they were taking. Then there was the ‘public facing’, these are questions asking respondent to go through the ‘distribution’ which was at the centre of their actions. Everything evolved around the distribution(s), thus I was interested in how they interpreted the main challenges when distributing within the informal spaces where distributions took place. Much of my questioning was based on my own previous experiences as an activist doing the same roles as the interviewees. I wanted to uncover the main challenges facing activists in a context constrained by heavy policing and working crew controlled squats and encampments.

The themes covered by the respondents in the interview were broad but I tried to keep topics centred on the main challenges that existed during distribution. The relationships formed in these moments were (and are) key to border activism. The idea of solidarity and care is very much an affective type of activism, as it aims to soften the harsh realities of ‘irregular’⁴⁵ migration. What I found profound during these interactions are power dynamics that exist between European passport holders (activists), undocumented

⁴⁵ a more accurate term would be ‘illegalised’

(migrants) and (un)-documented 'border workers' (migrants involved in some function to smuggling 'networks'). So I wanted to uncover the interpretation of activist's experience in these informal spaces where the power of either the activist, the state or the worker was never conclusive. Counter to previous research on citizen-led provisions (humanitarian assistance or legal advice), in the informal transit space the power and knowledge of each actor is ambivalent.

Themes covered in the interviews were applicable to all interviewees, while other line of questioning was specific to context (places and people). Themes that cut across all of the interviews with activists were production of power and knowledge; hierarchy; personal and collective emotional labour; state and smuggler violence; non-verbal communication and body language; use of social media; border activism terminology and norms.

Other semi- and unstructured Interviews (recorded and unrecorded) (n.11)

Other interviews consisted of a miscellaneous actors: local NGO worker that had over 7-years of experience working with migration population in Serbia; a local activist that worked inside the transit camps whom was critical and outspoken to the government's handling of migration and border 'management'; one Serbian citizen that lived next to the border and claimed his father was a border policemen; one Serbian investigative journalist specialised in uncovering state corruption, and a filmmaker from Afghanistan that had been monitoring smuggling TikTok videos. Moreover x2 phone calls were taken with x1 NGO worker based in the south of Serbia. These calls acted as situation reports to gain a better understanding what was happening in the southern borders where internal pushbacks from the north would end up in camps in the south.

Informal interviews and instant messaging (non recorded interviews) (n.5)

Collecting data on sensitive topics requires adaptation to traditional methods. When it came to informal interviews with ‘working crew’ members, no recorded devices were present, either at the request of interviewee or producing a recorded device would have been inappropriate and may have caused anxiety and distrust. When I presented myself as a researcher it was always ex-post rapport building. If the conversation moved into description that sat within the parameters of a specific code or broad theme I would ask the respondent if they were happy for me to record the information as part of a research project about people’s experiences along the Balkan route. I would explain anonymity would be respected, by creating pseudonyms and storing data securely on passworded devices and destroyed.

Other informal interviews were conducted with migrants that experienced traumatic. Respondents were incredibly fearful of perpetrators finding out they were sharing their testimonies, as reports at the time suggested that one criminal group was active in the camps, transit hubs and along the borders. The group in question were known to kidnap groups of migrants and smuggling guides if they had not paid the group to pass the groups ‘territory’ — close to the border crossings and pushback location. In order to protect their identities, no recording equipment was used, pseudo-nationalities and names were recorded. Me and a colleague I met during fieldwork conducted the interviews together with one asking questions, and the other taking minutes of the interview.

When it came to using instant messaging applications I found digital apps to be a great resource to stay in contact with people I had met along the route. Mobile technology proved a useful tool to set up interviews at a later date by keeping the rapport going via instant messages and to check in on the respondents progress and experiences further into

their journeys and when they arrived at their chosen destinations. Thus the field was stretched far beyond the physical environments I had first met them. Moreover instant messaging was also instrumental for engaging in sensitive topics, where the technology built a comfort barrier between the researcher and the researched. Dawson and Fan (2025) argue instant messaging is a valuable method to collect sensitive material that respondents would otherwise feel reluctant to share. Despite in-person interviews as the go to research method for 'vulnerable migrant populations' (Fedyuk and Zentai, 2018, p.171), when it comes to researching forms of migrant labour that is either hidden from the public gaze, or criminalised and demonised in the public debate, means it is paramount the researcher creates the interview conditions for in-depth narrative building into these less visible worlds (Anderson, 2000). Although the method provides safety for both researcher and researched, I found the application does not match the rapport one can build during physical interactions.

Two people I contacted via instant messaging responded to my initial questioning after their numbers were given to me via activists that had already been in contact during the time they were either crossing the borders or working for a crew at the border (both contacted in 2024). The two respondents were approached via an instant messaging service. The first respondent did not feel comfortable to talk over the phone, on camera or meet physically. The first participant was picked for his insights on one of the working crews that operated in the north of Serbia. I asked questions related to the crews origins, the insignia they used to brand their services (numbers and symbols) and how this material corresponded to real-world identities. After a while he seemed uncomfortable and hesitant to respond to my questioning and communication eventually broke down.

The second example was introduced in the same way. His contact was passed to me by an activist that did not want to speak with him because of his ties to smuggling. His name corresponded with the respondents at the time of ethnography, as one of the ‘bosses’ that operated X border where I previously conducted fieldwork. He claimed to be retired from smuggling, and after speaking with him on and off for over the course of one month I took the decision to stop responding to his messages when he started to ask me to help him find asylum on the grounds that other smugglers wanted to kill him and his brother. Moreover I was wary of the status of this character and did not want to delve deeper into his predicament due to the sensitivity of his claims and the content in which he was sharing. Through the Instant Messaging service, distance gave an element of confidentiality, it also raised an ethical quandary where personal and professional boundaries started to blur (O’Reilly, 2012).

Data Analysis Techniques

The data collected in the study includes participant observation, semi-structured interviews, media articles and grey literature, and digital material. The study takes, what O’Reilly (2012, p.30) calls an ‘iterative-inductive’ approach to ethnography, meaning ‘data collection, analysis and writing are not discrete phases but inextricably linked.’ Within weeks of fieldwork in the spring of 2023, I started to create themes and revert back to literature that helped to conceptualise the empirical findings. When I returned back to the field and gathered more empirical data (interviews, observations, digital materials), I started drafting emerging themes which later guided fieldwork — interviews reworked, streamlined observations, and assumptions and theoretical conclusions strengthened.

I transcribed the interviews by listening through the recordings and typing the dialogue verbatim. In the second round of interviews, I used MAXQDA⁴⁶ to produce the transcript and then I would listen to the audio and make corrections to mistakes made by the software in the transcripts. At first read, most of the transcriptions were not always clear, thus listening and re-listening to interview audio was not only important for clarity, it helped in understanding hesitations and sudden changes in topic not captured within the transcript. Sometimes background conversations and noise was picked up on the microphone and transcribed by the software.

As I went through each interview I would create codes under broad themes and underline new themes when they appeared in the interview. I then created a code sheet for both sets of interviews (activist and migrant). I would write in the code sheet all the separate units of text (paragraphs and sentences), group them into their themes and look for similarities, variations and exact details of the codes. This helped to build nuance in the themes, codes and sub codes. This follows Charmaz's (2006) grounded theory method to consciously construct theoretical explanations. Where I depart from Charmaz is that themes are linked to past concepts taken directly from the critical border and migration studies while taking concepts from other fields linked to sociology (e.g. media, spatial studies, and Political Economy). Lastly, grounded theory is criticised for not making substantive links to broader

⁴⁶ 1) MAXQDA policy saves data exclusively on computer as a .mx24 file.

2) The manufacturer of MAXQDA VERBI GmbH has no access to your data. Audio or video files automatically transcribed in MAXQDA are processed exclusively on GDPR-compliant servers.

3) Audio and video files are deleted immediately from the server after the transcription is completed. The generated transcripts are automatically deleted seven days after MAXQDA has imported them into your project or you have downloaded them manually.

4) No personal data is sent to AI models.

5) Encrypted data transmission: Information remains secure during transfer by using only encrypted connections.

structural issues (O'Reilly, 2012) whereas this study is situated within contemporary and historical forces, critical of political power and its various institutional arms.

For recording the daily practices of border activism, I would jot down in short hand style on to my mobile phone contextual notes that related to a theme at the time of the observation. The messiness of participant observation meant I was not always able to note in great detail what I was seeing, or hearing in the moment, nor did I have time to expand on these short hand notes immediately. Sometimes multiple days would pass without updating my fieldwork diary with my latest short-hand notes, potentially jeopardising richness and critical reflection. Despite fieldwork condition limitation, most of the relevant observations that dropped into X, Y, Z relevant theme or new finding were often vivid visual, verbal memories I was able to piece together from the short hand note. I would take several hours away from the daily distractions of activism by finding somewhere quiet to write up field notes into lengthier description and reflective journal writing.

When it came to the visual analysis, this was much more straight forward. I adapted Fazeli, Sabbetti and Ferrari's (2023) 'Visual-Verbal Video Analysis (VVVA) method, adapted from grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The method helped me to analyse videos systematically, adapting the authors units of analysis to fit the video content.

Step 1: multimodal characteristics

- speech, body language, gestures and body movement, icons and symbols, writing, sounds,

Step 2 video style

- color, setting, number of camera angles shots and views, sample screenshots, objects included and background

Step 3 Characteristics of primary character (character, place of origin, sex, identities, geolocalities regions, and towns, tribal affiliation, ethnicity, gender, occupation, position in life)

As the first three categories were becoming repetitive data points, for instance always men, from one of four countries, working crew members, I then started to adapt the method and analyse the videos based on my own coding sheet (See below). In the second part in the analysis I kept a qualitative commentary in an open and reflexive way to use as a reference to the individual clips. Thus the coding sheet acted as a counting exercise, what code was featured in the clip and under what theme. The qualitative commentary provided thick description and reflection/analysis.

Broad Themes	Border Materiality	Socio-cultural References	Affiliation to group	Individual Ability
Sub-Themes	Border hardware Border guards Police equipment / police promo Border encampment/Squat Rearranging the border materials Territory/ space:landmarks/ locations Border/bordering interactions	Tribe names and ethnicity Music from origin, diaspora Symbols and emblems/animal emojis Flags Geography: the nation, places and spaces Combatant/ militaristic/terror references (sounds, clothing and political leaders) Clothing and accessories Hand Gestures Numbers of letters	A sense of movement and action Posing in a group Hand gestures and signals Clothing accessories Gang numbers/ letters Inter and intra gang intimidation and violence Overcoming obstacles	Geophysical conditions (terrain, Weather) Material conditions Re-arranging the border materials Sense of action and drama (physical running, ducking, and diving, jumping) National flags and text displaying geographical reach Leading groups of 'passengers' Local context, knowledge and connection (locals working with migrant smugglers)

Reflexivity During Analysis

After presenting at a conference my empirical findings and interpretation of video materials, it was pointed out by a senior colleague well versed in the field. One of the categories included in the slide (and in my coding sheet) grouped 'ethnicity/tribe' together, she discussed with me the re-production of coloniality in the conflation I made. Thus I revised my codes accordingly by referring to archives such as grey literature, media articles and academic material, to inform and strengthen codes and themes. When considering a deeper dive into the recent political and social histories of the research participants, in this case, historical changes in governance structures in Syria, especially in the local area in which Syrian crew named 515 originated (Dukhan, 2019). Moreover, observations made in

migrant youth videos, I called on Ilyas Yourish a film producer and director that had been studying the videos himself. In our discussion we covered the histories of Afghanistan military resistance and direct foreign powers that have shaped the countries history in which the crew videos made references.

There is an existing hierarchy based on class, race and cultural background between the communities in the border land and towns. I was resistant in creating codes that fell into racialising tropes, but a commitment to present the social differentiation that exists along routes and in transit space and not to homogenise groups into dominant language of 'migrant'. Processes of racialising differentiation intersects with the border regime. There are many different people from different backgrounds which stereotype and hold dehumanising views about other participants in the study based on nationality or region. In one of the border towns, one interviewee entered narratives on the 'afghan character'. During analysis I did not want to shy away from these tropes, considering individuals internalised and related to themselves. Although it is a fine line to re-produce racist tropes uncritically, but without censoring what I considered as racist, bigoted, and sexist narratives.

In the process of data gathering, analysis and writing, colloquial terms such as; 'working crew' was self-titled by some of the members (not all) and the activists. Migrants crossing the borders in the north were named by the activists and NGO coordinators as 'passengers'. One of the coordinators narrated to me this was a politically intentional move to decolonise the loaded terminology of 'smuggler' and the vulnerable 'victim' narrative of the 'poor migrant'. 'Working crew' became synonymous in other border areas with the terminology of 'gang' and 'mafia'. Gangs, transnational criminality, war and terrorism entered the lexicon of the state and media, activists locals and migrants themselves. Using

these terms are not neutral research choices to include in the study, they can be misleading and do not allow for nuance and context. The term gang, worker, passengers, migrant, 'people on the move', asylum seeker are all constructed by all different actors. For the privilege activist and researcher these terms can be reflected upon during their time in the field and in the write up of this study.

Ethics and Positionality

Conducting ethnographic research in borderlands where migration, illegality, and violence intersect inevitably raises complex ethical questions. This study was approved by the University of Bologna ethics committee and followed the procedures of informed consent, anonymity, and secure data storage. Formal approval only partly captures the ethical challenges of working in contexts where participants are routinely criminalised, displaced, and exposed to violence, and where the researcher's own position is constantly under negotiation.

Practically, obtaining written consent was often neither appropriate nor safe. For many migrants and border workers, signing documents could arouse suspicion or create risk, particularly when they were already navigating precarious relations with police, smugglers, and other authorities. For example questions related to the participant's experiences faced in the squats and encampments were especially difficult to broach in case of putting myself, and the respondent in potential harm, or the participants filtering their response as a survival strategy. At this point in the research the places we were engaging in were run by working crews that may find certain lines of questioning challenging to their power.

To overcome constraining factors, I resorted to informal conversations when the moment felt safe to broach. I would note down in short form the conversation as soon as I left the site where the conversation took place to then be elaborated in the field work diary. For

interviews conducted ‘in the field’, I managed to create an environment outside of these intense and controlled atmospheres during distribution. Two interviews conducted with migrants were taken at a site close to a transit camp negotiated with them at a time when they felt safe to do so. Others were conducted when I was travelling through places, for instance two were taken in Ljubljana, where migrants found rest and relative safety. Other interviews with migrants were taken in public spaces (parks and bars in Bihać) where the interviewee and myself decided we both felt comfortable.

When it came to consent, I relied on oral consent, reiterated at different stages of engagement, and explained my role in clear terms. My role as a researcher was not always clear to everyone present in the field site. To illustrate the point, sometimes the site may contain 200 people, despite it being an extraordinary field site and not necessarily public square, the type of ethnography was not only participatory but also covert. Moreover thick narratives are from people that I asked for consent and explained I was a researcher uncovering the lives of people along the Balkan route. I was always surprised how compliant people were and how readily they were to tell their stories. I would further explain anonymity would be maintained through the use of pseudonyms, coded nationalities, and the removal of identifying details in transcripts and field notes. Sensitive data was encrypted and stored securely.

Still, ethical practice could not be reduced to protocols. Working alongside grassroots doctors’ organisations and “no borders” groups meant that my everyday access to migrants was mediated by distributions of food, showers, or clothing. In these settings, the boundaries between activist solidarity, humanitarian relief, and ethnographic observation were blurred. Ethical dilemmas often emerged in the field: for instance, when migrants asked me for direct legal, financial or psychological assistance; especially when participants shared stories of criminal groups active in the camps; or when an interviewee

revealed information that could put them at risk if made public. In such cases, I prioritised safety and confidentiality, sometimes foregoing the collection of data in order to preserve trust and avoid harm.

My positionality was shaped by previous involvement in border activism in 2020, before beginning doctoral research. This experience facilitated entry into activist networks and enabled me to be welcomed by NGOs and grassroots groups. At the same time, it positioned me as both insider and outsider. While my activist background created rapport with some participants, my status as a European researcher with institutional backing meant I remained a privileged observer, able to cross borders at will while my interlocutors faced violent pushbacks and confinement.

Most of the time, this 'privileged' would fade into the daily workings of activism. Myself and the people I worked with on a daily basis often apply every ounce of energy in the immersion of everyday border struggles. The position of researcher is very much in the background. Sometimes weeks would pass when the researcher's hat is taken off. Most expend social and emotional energy engaged in everyday running of the organisation (daily tasks for preparing distributions, during distributions, post-distributions, planning for the next day), relationships within the group (conflicts and support), reacting to regular 'crises' from police interactions (apprehensions, deportation notices, assaults and intimidation), border violence (beatings and sustained injuries), migrant and activist psycho-social issues (drug abuse and trauma, burnout).

Participants read my identity in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways. For migrants, I was often seen as a trusted figure by association with humanitarian and activist groups, but also as someone with limited understanding of their lived precarity. For activists, I was a colleague but also a researcher, and this dual role sometimes caused tension, especially when organisational protocols restricted interviews or required oversight of my fieldwork.

My linguistic limitations further shaped my interactions: most interviews were conducted in English, which narrowed the pool of participants and placed communicative burdens on non-native speakers.

Being reflexive about these dynamics meant recognising how my presence influenced the material I could access. For example, my ability to enter certain squats or meet individuals involved in smuggling depended on activist gatekeepers, whose agendas shaped my pathway. Conversely, in moments when rapport developed spontaneously, I had to decide how to balance friendship, solidarity, and ethnographic inquiry. These entanglements meant that data collection was less a neutral extraction of information than a co-produced, relational process. This balance is also experienced during the writing process, making choices during (re)drafts of chapters of what to include and what to leave out is a reflexive practice always in flux. Moreover I passed the empirical chapter on border activism to a trusted comrade to check whether the material could jeopardise the ‘no borders’ grassroots movement and ruin any future trust and relations with the organisations that gave me access in the first place. At the same time, I walked the tight rope of not wanting to censor my interpretations and the narratives and interpretations of others, while some narrates touched on sensitive issues that were not applicable to the study.

Writing about border economies, and particularly about the labour of smuggling crews, carries risks of misrepresentation. Terms such as “smuggler,” “gang,” or “mafia” circulate widely in media and policy debates but often flatten the nuanced roles and survival strategies of people involved in border work. In the field, activists, migrants, and workers themselves used varied terms — “working crew,” “passenger,” “boss,” or “guide” — which conveyed different moral and political framings. In my writing, I have sought to reflect this multiplicity while resisting reductive criminalising conclusions. Where necessary, I

anonymised details about crews, places, or practices to avoid exposing participants to additional risk.

Responsibility also extends to how I represent suffering and violence. Accounts of pushbacks, kidnappings, or exploitation must be written carefully, without sensationalism, but also without silencing participants' testimonies. I have approached such narratives as both empirical data and as ethical encounters, recognising that participants shared stories not only as "informants" but as people seeking to make their experiences heard.

Finally, my responsibility is not only to the academy but more so to the communities I worked alongside. Many activist groups I collaborated with are committed to producing evidence of border violence for advocacy purposes. While my thesis is not an activist report, I have sought to ensure that my research contributes to a wider understanding of racialised border regimes and the survival economies they generate. My position, then, is one of situated engagement: shaped by solidarity with migrants and activists, constrained by the privileges of academic research, and accountable to the ethical imperative of minimising harm in contexts of deep inequality.

Chapter 4 Migrant Labour Found Productive in the ‘Working Crew’

Introduction

It is an unusually stormy afternoon in early May 2023—the wind howling, with spells of rain and unusually cold temperatures for a Serbian spring. Despite the miserable weather, the working crew, an ad hoc group of self-organised border workers from Afghanistan felt it worth while to brave the weather for the weekly shower run organised by European internationalist no borders group and NGOs⁴⁷. Some of the crew were clearly still in their teens, others in their late twenties (maybe 30s). At first, it was not easy to distinguish who was a ‘passenger’—name given to people that had paid for the services to cross the fence, from who was a ‘boss’ coordinating and the ‘guides’ following the orders to facilitate movement over Orban’s fence. At this point of the journey the passengers were completely reliant on the working crew, waiting to cross less than a kilometre from the fence was a delicate moment as the real danger of ‘counter-smuggling’ operations were a daily and nightly occurrence.

Located roughly less than a kilometre from Victor Orban’s fence, the weekly shower run at The Farm is almost finished. This is the first time I come across Aryan⁴⁸ (AR) waiting silently for the last 4 hours — and the last of nearly 30 people to take a shower. I clocked him avoiding verbal exchanges and physical jostling that often broke out among the men as to who was next. In a place where status and visibility were often won through stereotypical masculine performance of strength and dominance, Aryan’s demeanour was to retreat and keep his distance.

⁴⁷ Internationalist in the sense they found a common cause that went beyond civic nationalism and rather found each other in a third place (Serbia) parallels can made to the leftist International brigades in Spain

⁴⁸ All the names in this chapter are given pseudonyms to protect their identities



Photo by L. Jabs 'Showers at 'the Farm' (May 2023)

Despite AR's quiet detachment from the rest of the crew at The Farm, he too had been attracted after a phone call from a friend telling him the quick and sizeable earnings he could make in Serbia. Eighteen months after his arrival in the borderlands of Vojvodina, the landscape changed overnight. On the 27th October 2023, a sweeping counter-smuggling operation dismantled the encampments and effectively re-routing west towards Bosnia (NNK report, 'Watch the camp', Bressan et al., 2024). The loose infrastructure of smuggling labour was shattered. I would later find out that Aryan (amongst tens of others — 80+) were arrested just days after the raids began and taken to Subotica police station, where he and others later reported torture used to extract confessions to alleged possession of fire arms. He was eventually transferred to a transit camp in Sjenica under lock-down conditions, while some of his peers were imprisoned or detained (in transit

camps) elsewhere in the country. The operation marked a turning point: a blueprint for Serbia's crackdown on so-called irregular migration and smuggling. Where previously it had been relatively easy to move through the country with and without a smuggler before reaching the fence, the Ministry of Interior (MUP) along side police departments started additional operations in the west of the country emerged (BVMN and MVI, January 2024 report)—racial profiling was conducted, police check points remained in place in the north of country (60 kilometres south of Subotica), people found without documents were detained and forcibly relocated to transit or detention camps and prisons.

After the initial rearrangement of bordering across the peninsular (November 2023 - February 2024), the direction and quality of mobility had shifted entirely. The border workers active in the north were no longer embedded in Serbia's northern border lands; many had been serving prison sentences, while a handful that managed to escape the crackdown established new staging posts near Sarajevo, Bihać and Velika Kladusá in the north-west and in the far north of Republika Srpska. Following their movements—and those of the passengers—I found myself following the movement of people across several emerging routes and borders. Serbia had been largely cleared of any visible movement; the only remaining activity was the silent and fast, state-sanctioned work of select crews given the green light to operate. While embedded with another activist team in Bihać, I heard from an activist in Serbia who told me AR was heading west and needed some clean clothes and water after an arduous journey dodging the police 'migrant search zones' in Loznica⁴⁹. that had been in place to emulate the major operation in the north of Serbia. We met outside Lipa transit camp on a warm late winter's afternoon and we reflected on the last months of chaos.

⁴⁹ Loznica police department emulated the policing tactics used in the north of Serbia

Up until this point, I only knew Aryan through passing conversations—stories about how he left Afghanistan and had once lived in various places across Europe. Escaping wars, and navigating penal bureaucratic systems and infrastructures, made for an incredibly precarious existence. For the workers at the Farm squat, the dispossession from back home translated into their precarious condition on the fringes of Europe's casualized labour market. According to AR, many at The Farm held Italian passports, having lived for years on the Mediterranean peninsula in insecure, low-wage work. AR knew most of the boys' and men's families—he came from the same province and even the same village as many of them (villages of Baghlan-Kunduz, Afghanistan). While our conversation centres on the trans-local connections working crews have between northern Serbia and his province, he reflected on the fact that many of the men who lived, worked, and even died at the border were boys of families he knew well. Before arriving in Serbia, he had been working in construction in a seaside town in Italy, until a friend called him with a proposition to come to Serbia, as the money in smuggling work is 'good'.



Cricket Match at Farm with Crew and Passengers — I bowled a poor over with at least 2 wides and one hit for six (Photo by L. Jabs)

AR found the offer appealing—certainly more so than the poorly paid work he was scraping by with in Italy. His role in Serbia became clear: take people to the border, where ladders are positioned along points in the fence where guards were known to look the other way—or simply not be present at all, this would be his reality for the next 18 months.

Several months after meeting AR in Bosnia (March 2024), I learned he had returned to Italy. He picked up work again as a day labourer, trying to save enough to eventually return to Afghanistan for personal reasons. But life since Serbia would not be the same. That chapter, was one he would rather leave behind. What began as a decision to improve his material condition became a source of personal torment. He tells me about an individual that he personally knew well, one of the adolescent men (barely adult age) that was murdered in northern Serbia during my time in northern Serbia. I remember it well,

especially for the fine work one of my comrades did in facilitating the removal and identification of the body and connecting the individual with family members. This was not the first time death in the border land fell on the shoulders of inexperienced grassroots NGO workers or activists in conjunction with border workers. The death of the young man seemed to encompass the great feeling of shame and regret AR expressed in ever setting foot in Serbia and claimed he had ‘nothing to show [money]’ for his time in the north.

Making sense of the individual biographies of the border worker that lives temporarily and permanently along Europe’s political experiments in population control, cannot be detached without an interrogation into the global structural, economic, and political conditions that brought border workers like AR to Serbia in the first place. Labelling someone a ‘smuggler’ without connecting their condition to the broader European political economy—one that classifies bodies as either productive or expendable, only plays into the dominant narratives that pervade media and policy. Whether AR was constructing houses in Italy or guiding migrants across borders in Serbia, the category of migrant, with all its racial and gendered stereotypes remained economically constant—tied to cycles of low pay, precarious work, and spells of underemployment or wageless labour and poor working conditions.

What Abdul-Rahman’s story does present is new forms of value extraction that cannot be disentangled from new forms of capital accumulation, embedded in historic and contemporary dispossession. I argue ‘Border work(ers)’ are part of what Marx (in Cornell, 2017) and others (Rajaram, 2018; Bird and Schmidt, 2023; Bhattacharyya, 2018; 2024) would describe as the relative surplus populations (RSOs)—in economic terms ‘the reserve army of labour’—a part of the population’s use value emerges only in moments when capitalists drive down labour costs and politically used to split class solidarity along racial

categorisation. But what does racial capitalism provide as an analytical lens in the seemingly detached social worlds of borders and routes (corridors)? To make the analytical connections, border regimes rely on the body power of migrants (Rajaram, 2018) to keep the route fluid. The build up of migrants at the border is not politically expedient, nor is the political climate sympathetic to countries seemingly ‘soft on migration’, thus the work of the ‘smuggler’ is politically instrumentalised for the regime to function ‘in theory’, and to demonise in moments when (in the case of Serbia) smuggling power achieves visible command of the regime. It is a balancing act for the state authorities. Moreover, I interrogate the social reproduction of transit spaces, not only from the practices of smuggling, although they are inextricably linked, but by focussing on the ‘petty’ economies that sustain life during transit and in protracted periods of time immobile. Thus the spatialities of externalised border regimes are where surplus populations find their bodies to be productive under the expansion of emerging types of value extraction (border regimes) in an era of racial capitalism.

In Serbia, AR’s body power was turned into labour for the border regime to function in the everyday criminalised practices of smuggling and other ‘informal’ economies of transit, his use value generated through the convergence of two forces: first the demand for mobility in the post-covid boom; and second the expansion of state-security capital aimed at controlling mobility. This convergence creates what I argue as “economies of transit”—spaces where racialised labour becomes temporarily productive under ‘shadow economies’ (Rajaram, 2018; Mezzadra, 2012). To reduce AR’s story to one of criminal deviance ignores these deeper historical and economic logics at play. The framing of smugglers and migrants as either villains or victims, often by technocrats and populists alike, fetishises their identities as a dangerous or infantile social type, while obscuring the underlying structures of exclusion and dispossession (Bhattacharyya, 2018). AR’s story is not an

exception—it is emblematic of the ‘dark underbelly of capitalism’ (Rajaram, 2018), where the backstage operations of migration control (security) and mobility at the external frontiers of an imagined provincial Europe (Chakrabarty, 2000).

Border Work: Labour, Space and Infrastructure

The bodies of men and boys working the borders are made laborious when border infrastructures (human and non-human) are put in place to control mobility. Camps, fences, and other security expenditure that is intended to direct, disrupt and deter mobility are re-arranged, and re-purposed by local smuggling practices, into what Keshavarz (2024) terms a ‘material critique of borders’. The working crews were a collective force (labour power) in negotiating with the human and non-human instruments of capitalist logic(s) and Euro-nativist politics.

During and after the long ‘summer of migration’ in 2015, a four metre high fence along the 175-kilometres of border line separating Serbian and Hungarian territory, had been erected by the Hungarian government (Fülöp, 2024 in the Balkan Insight). At the time, European nativist politics was in the ascendancy. According to the Political Director to Prime Minister Victor Orban (since 2021), ‘the border [fence] is both a political symbol and an effective, practical defence tool...in the age of globalisation.’⁵⁰ This ‘defence tool’, became the gateway to the EU’s Schengen ‘free movement’ area, and was (and still is) symbolic (Via TikTok and other social media platforms) in narrating what it means to cross European borders. One of the national investigative journalists covering the business side of the smuggling networks in Serbia confirmed, ‘everybody [working crew] needed to facilitate the road through the fence’ (Interview with Sasa Dragjolo in Nov 2024). Anna, one of the local activist that saw various working crews, come and go, over her seven year

⁵⁰Published in Figyelő interview titled ‘The Fence is a Symbol of the Nation State’ with Orbán Balázs

period, describes the territory next to the fence as, “too small and the money [made by the smugglers] became too big” (Nov 2024).

For migrants (also known as passengers at the time by NGOs, activists, and working crew members), crossing the north of Serbia, was fast and labour intensive. One of the long term NGO workers, came to the realisation when mapping the encampments where her team of doctors would service the squats near the fence, she found, ‘people would go all the way to Sombor (west) and then come all the way to Horgos to cross into such a very specific line of fence’ (Interview April 2024). The activities were visible, and seemed to have been normalised — the extraordinary made ordinary, by all actors, institutions and agencies. Orban’s supposed line of defence was being squatted by multiple working crews on the Serbian side of the border, turning this section of the route into ‘the’ major smuggling hub in south eastern Europe at the time (2022-23) (Panara, 2022 published in InfoMigrants). Externalisation (policy and practice) could not have been more exposed by the crews. Spatial practices conducted by the crews meant young men (and boys) facilitated ‘drivers and cars, both in Serbia and in Hungary [both sides of the fence]’. According to Dragjolo during our interview, he said crews took ‘the territorial approach [next to the fence], sitting there like a border guard, Afghans did that, and Moroccans in Horgos’ (Interview w/ N, Nov 2024).

‘Taking the territorial approach’ in northern Serbia was important because the flat farm land and tree cover (small woodland) made the operations of smuggling more accessible to the fence. Natural topography is a key variable in the rhythm and frequency of mobility. Thus, natural terrain is made political. Schindel (2019) writes the weaponisation of natural forces is one way that states abandon responsibility. Rather the labour power of crews exploited the territory, repurposing the accessibility of the terrain to their own advantage.

Not only was the territory flat, the frequency of mobility was advanced by the main highway (A1) in Serbia that led to the border and into Hungary. The highway from Belgrade made travel fast and direct to the Schengen Area. Moreover, Serbia's relaxed visa rules with Tunisia and Morocco, created a clear link where mobile populations and workers were able to fly directly to Belgrade and up to the most northerly reaches of hungarian majority Vojvodinians [sic]. Thus, smuggling crews with the aid of local Serbian citizens (taxi drivers, rentiers and police) facilitated via land, roughly 180 kilometres up the A1 highway (BG airport—Horgoš) to the fence (Bzganovic and Gec, 2022). Highways and flat topography made border work fluid, visible and accessible, but contested, demarcated and violent (more on Working crew violence and the media in chapter 5). The last, but no means least important factor that shaped the character of the borderland was the border fence itself; an obstacle that made crossing the land labour intensive and expensive⁵¹.

Although conditions were favourable for working crews, the extraction of migrants' capital to pay for crossing services—before, during, and after the Hungarian fence—made it nearly impossible to cross north without their blessing, especially given the risk involved with crossing over the fence and the Hungarian pushbacks. Radoš Durovic, APC executive director, explains to the Serbian state TV channel RTS in late September 2023, “absurdly, the more unsuccessful these [border crossing] attempts are, the more money these people [smugglers] make...”⁵² pointing to the Hungarian fence and pushbacks as the leading factors pushing up prices. Reliance on the working crew was vital for having any chance to cross this section of the route. To illustrate the point, Anna, an activists living in northern

⁵¹ A comparison to be made here is the gated pre-industrial town that charged a tax to enter

⁵² <https://www.azilsrbija.rs/apc-claims-that-the-policy-of-fences-and-pushback-creates-and-strengthens-smuggling/?lang=en>

Serbia, remembers when the working crew(s) started to enforce their control over movement in the area:

“I remember a Hazari man waited for two years before leaving Subotica. He eventually did cross the border alone in January 2022, but afterwards [later in 2022] it was so difficult [to cross without a smuggler]. One young guy came back to camp, waited for money to be sent and eventually gave the smugglers what they wanted”

Infrastructural, topographic, and socio-spatial variables influenced the rhythm and frequency of smuggling operations in the borderlands. What was constant and increasingly familiar would be the weekly visits me and the teams I worked with seeing the same faces. These men, were like AR, working the squats and taking people to the fence. Border work was made into a lifeworld within itself, its own place of work and living. This Life was under constant strain whereby the pressures of affective and bodily work was dedicated to mobility. The hyper commodification of transit at this time was driven by the tailored services to meet the demands of the regime. Complexity and sophistication drives the commodification of not only facilitating border crossing, but laborious activities to accommodate in between moments before and after crossings. Thus the labour intensive practices of evasion and negotiation with the local state authorities and care and control before crossings was paramount to the social reproduction of life in the borderland. The conditions facing non-state actors to share governing roles with the state (Achilli, 2024), played out in the self-managed encampments that dotted along sections of the border fence, these were spaces where the embodying experiences of racial capital are seen at their most intense and naked. The Crews in the north were critical pieces of collective, embodied infrastructures that folded into non-human infrastructures (border materiality and

‘nature’) (Keshavarz, 2024; Coole and Frost, 2010), their bodies both exploited and exploitable through their valued labour in the borderland.

Logistics in the borderland: Affective Labour and Social Reproduction

This land route demanded meticulous planning based on knowledge of the border(land) and its infrastructures, and access to informal local support networks. Here, “the game”—colloquial name used by migrants (Augustová and Sapoch, 2020; Minca and Collins, 2021) and border workers to cross borders ‘irregularly’—was rarely a solo act in Serbia (during fieldwork). A large proportion of border crossings are entirely enabled by the whole of the ‘working crew(s)’: guides, ladder-positioners, lookouts, food vendors, ‘security’ providers, fixers, and their external partners such as local taxi drivers/firms, rentiers and police. By the time I arrived in the spring of 2023, tasks of facilitating movement within the borderland and over the fence, required processing and accommodating (paying) passengers, with crews organised through the differentiation of labour activities that seemed fluid yet structured and coordinated in their delivery. People knew their role but their roles were prone to constant adaptation depending on the composition of the crew⁵³.

Alongside the actual activities that went into scaling the fence and control over the commissariat's structures in Serbia and in transit camps in Bosnia, logistical organisation and accommodation beforehand took place in the abandoned farm houses and woodland covered encampments. These were strategically placed next to Orban’s ‘nativist’ show piece (fence) for quick access to the crossing points. I spent half my time visiting an area in what was termed by one of the long standing NGO workers as ‘Little Syria’ in the north west of Vojvodina, where at least four squats and encampments made up the main hubs of

⁵³ Composition could change based on demand or supply — demand-side of people wanting to cross, and supply-side in the conditions to cross. The conditions varied along policing tactics and what event happened that night or day which spurred media focus and political action in the form of further policing methods (interventions)

accommodation. These spaces, at the time, were run by a Syrian working crew, that were paid commission by single guides that would take groups of passengers across the borderland territory and over the fence (according to interviews with Dragjolo and Sarah). Two of the places I visited named Ranch ‘hotel’, and (abandoned) ‘Factory’. Factory (at the time) was the largest known squatted border encampment in Vojvodina⁵⁴. The Syrian working crew coordinated with other crews to pass a specific part (mentioned above) of the fence north of Subotica, roughly 60km east of ‘Little Syria’⁵⁵. Migrants would be transported (usually) from Belgrade direct to Sombor camp or to the factory or Ranch. Hundreds of people waited everyday in the squats, they were ‘processed’ in quick time (never spending more than a few days in the squats); cars (and taxis) picked and dropped off groups of four, eight, and sometimes whole families by the hour. On the way back from our distributions at Ranch and Restaurant, taxis full with hopeful passengers would overtake us, speeding into the distance along the Sombor-Subotica road (E-662), all making their way to the fence crossing.

Other roles consisted of the general up keeping of the squats — usually the domain of the youngest border workers (boys of minor and young adolescent age). One young male from Syria, at the time was working as a fixer, making sure the delivery of food was ordered and brought from the nearest town (over 10 kilometres away) to the ‘Ranch’ squat. Delegating with the local taxi firm, he lived and saved off the cuts taken from each order. His dream was to reach Germany after another month of saving. Firstly his role was a product of working crew control and the young Syrian’s obligation to pay his way by selling his labour. Thus the border regime created the conditions for migrant youth to sell their labour while creating the conditions to why he had to sell his labour in the first place, a kind of labour of

⁵⁴ Housing hundreds of migrants in the months of fieldwork May — September 2023

⁵⁵ ‘Little Syria’ was the colloquial name given by long standing NGO workers in reference to the working crews situated in the western part of Vojvodina

survival (Augustova et al., 2023). This further reinforces Richter's (2021, p.1444) findings which debunks the 'migrant smuggler as a highly organised transnational criminal'. Moreover Achilli's (2024) intervention points to how smuggling labour are not 'products solely of coercion', but rather a structural reality of bordering regime in Serbia at the time.

Along side the survival explanations, it was the affective forms of labour required of the crews that upon reflection, made some of the men look back in fondness of the work they did to 'support' individuals and especially families crossing the fence, as one of the long term NGO workers that got to know the workers on a daily basis, tells me in an interview several months after leaving (northern Serbia), "When I've spoken to people [Working Crew], they would say; those were horrible but beautiful times as well, because I think it gave a lot of those boys an opportunity to be kind to people. Like a lot of the boys who talk about the time, they'll tell me like, oh, "I helped a family that day". I think [smuggling facilitation and accommodation] [is] just a pressure cooker of emotions." This further plays into the moral economies attached to smuggling based on the affective capacities of the men (Achilli 2015; Sanchez, 2017, Triandafyllidou, 2018, Maher, 2018).

Not only were the extraordinary events of crossing the fence adrenalin fuelled, so were the everyday activities that surrounded several of the encampments and squats. Beyond their logistical roles, border workers had to relate to passengers' emotional experiences in the disorienting moments of irregular border crossing, while maintaining social control and awareness of internal hierarchies and rival crews willing to use violence to take another's territory and capital earned, were realities that constantly shaped their occupation. Not only are border workers central to mobility governance, they were central figures in the improvised social reproduction in the external borderlands of Europe.

This is where the border workers, lived and worked together. The spaces were high in all sorts of ‘energy’ and ‘emotion’ — passengers anxious to leave and complete their trip, and the working crews living and working the fast paced squats was an almost 24-hour occupation — pressures of daily working conditions built on adrenaline and fatigue (see. Vammen and Kohl, 2022 on ‘affective’ borderwork). When I first arrived in May 2023, ‘Factory’ was estimated on a weekly basis by the NGOs to be have roughly 200+ people staying there at any given time. The Factory was the largest known transit squat in the northern borderlands, an old abandoned factory building completely hollowed out with discarded materials left over by the numbers of passengers that stayed for a few days, before taking the trip to the fence and into Hungary (near Horgoš).

This part of the journey was where energy from the passengers and workers melted together (more on this in chapter 6). Quite often fights would break out during the activist’s mobile humanitarian distribution services, to the point where distros were aborted and suspended. We [activists and NGOs] questioned our conduct when distributing at Factory and whether our presence was conducive to the people on the move’s well-being. It was as if the last week(s) emotional and physical turmoil that had been gathered along the land routes found its way into these concentrated and densely populated worker ‘controlled’ squats. The physical and emotional fatigue was palpable and (sometimes) vocalised by passengers and crews. One Syrian passenger, was frustrated with how the guide’s, ‘lying [sic] to us about how much further we had to walk.’ His transit group walked across Bulgaria for 10 days, with little food for four of those days. It was not uncommon at the time of fieldwork (2023-2024) for people to be guided through Bulgaria and into Serbia either with local drivers arranged with Bulgarian ‘mafia’ (for roughly 2-days) or as some of the testimonies say, walking for up to two weeks in ‘the jungle’ — dense woodlands. Multiple passengers experienced what they felt was misinformation or

mistreatment by the crews, these emotions started with discussion and then (at times) spilled into violence.

At this stage of someone's journey, because bordering practices from the Bulgarian state were intent on capturing moving through the country's territory rather than letting them pass through⁵⁶, guides turn to riskier terrains, this made relationships with guides tenuous and strained during physical exhausting moments. Achilli (2018) argues the reputation of smugglers are tied to the quality of service, in a race to the top to deliver good service to maintain a reputation. This is hinged on familial connections and duty to exiled communities (ibid). In contrast, testimonies from Moroccan guides relayed to me how no previous experience was needed to be recruited. At the time, Moroccan youth had little connection to state officials in this section of the route, thus evading the Turkish border police, stories of hiding and walking in the woods for days, members of the transit group deciding to give up, coercive forms of control and punishment to keep discipline and a general lack inexperienced, and amateur service was common.

During transit, the experiences of two Moroccan guides required to carry out physical and emotional coercive measures, both rationalised these tactics as necessary as they took responsibility seriously, plus the fear of being caught was overwhelming. The competence of the guide was made acute when fear, anxiety and exhaustion would surprise and creep into the group's morale in moments of pressure (sometimes lost for days, loss of mobile connection, heated moments of evasion from police and border guards). Larry, an Algerian national, previously living in Italy after being deported, making it his second attempt along the route, reluctantly, with an air embarrassment, runs through the scenario of when he had to physically restrain a 'passenger' as to not give away their location to the Bulgarian

⁵⁶ Reported migrant residency numbers in Bulgaria are low, as are asylum recognition rates. In practice, Bulgaria functions as a detention-deportation zone, where onward movement is largely dependent on non-state actors.

authorities. Larry and the other guide, do not fit neatly into either the ‘good’ service provider, based on reputation, trustworthiness and success, nor can they be judged on a perpetrator/victim dichotomy (Richter, 2021; Achilli, 2018).

Instead, smuggling along the Balkan route was partly founded on the precarious labour of migrants, not able to pay for the services of smugglers themselves as a result of high stakes restrictive state bordering. Moreover it takes away risk for the coordinator to not have to be on the ground in the everyday messiness of border crossing. For what a coordinator gains in a low risk structure, they may lose in reputation. Recruiting people to guide with no previous experience, relied on the labour power of a young man prepared to walk for several days across challenging terrains with very little knowledge was factored into the equation. For the guide himself, he becomes a free agent — subcontracted out to do the dirty work of smuggling labour, his success is hinged on his affective labour skills — holding your nerve in high intensity moments. The multiplication of subjectivities poorer migrant has to draw from being the guide was something they acted out in the moment, sometimes in less than savoury ways to create order in high intensity moments. The labour of the guide was structured along economies of survival intersected with the reality of bordering control and potential imprisonment (see. Augustova et al., 2021 on ‘Becoming a Smuggler’). For smuggling crews, they were not immune to the violences of the border regime, they rather worked visibly with local and national state authorities in northern Serbia and evaded the regime at different sections of the route, especially in Bulgaria where state tolerance was lower and smuggling was hidden and tightly controlled by local actors and remote coordinators.

Social and Cultural ‘Capital’, knowledge and Border Violence

Additional to affective and body labour that goes into border work relations; the police raids, evictions, interceptions, assaults, police bribery/extortion, violent internal conflicts between workers and rival working crews, local vigilantism all punctuated the daily rhythm(s) of bordering in northern Serbia. To adapt to the challenges of policing, crew members draw from social and cultural ‘capital’ they had acquired through multiple months and years building social relations. Through the development and application of soft skills, relationships with, local police, border guards, central police squads (gendarmerie), local taxi firms, landlords, farmers contributed to the situated ‘knowledge’ (labour+time+trust) of border work(ers). Nimkar and Mohammadi (2023) use Bourdieu’s ‘social capital’ as an important element to be able to operate within ‘border ecosystems’ where social relations are built with border officials (bribes, patrol schedules and arranged crossings). Similarly to cross Orban’s fence, it was only possible with the arrangement of officials in order to scale the barbed wire fence.

Not only are forms of social capital important for the act of border crossing they are important for the social reproduction of life in the external borderlands next to Schengen. For example in Vojvodina, to the west ‘Little Syria’ and north of Subotica (Palic and Horgos) — the ‘waiting rooms⁵⁷’ of squats and encampments accommodating people before making the crossing, the intense fast paced nature of these spaces of transient activity, orchestrated by crews with various amounts of experience working in Serbia, were in constant conversation amongst themselves, on mobile phones, organising with taxi drivers, in between moments laughing and joking with locals that came to visit for one reason or another, while the local rentier came to collect money and hand money to taxi drivers. I argue that within this transient junction, an ecosystem—or rather, an ‘engine room’,

⁵⁷ squats, encampments, hiding places, ‘safe houses’

accommodating and assorting the closely knit social relations required for survival. Here, social capital was collectively woven into the fabric of the situated environment, sustained by the tenuous relations between local patrons and those who exercised logistical control and ownership over borderland spaces and property.

Nonetheless, the border workers ‘on the frontline’, ‘doing the dirty work’ of migrant smuggling and accommodating ‘operations’ were not immune to spectacles of border control from the Serbian Ministry of Interior (MUP) bringing along Police Units from a number of divisions. Smuggling crews adapted to increasing amounts of violent disruption from the state. John (older man from Afghanistan, in his late 40s, and his second time along the route, first time during the recent US-led war and occupation in Afghanistan) informs me on the recent evictions of what was called ‘The Farm’, “20 people taken to camp [government-run transit camp]...They destroyed our tents [tarpaulin structures at The Farm] and many [people] taken to Kikinda [government-run transit camp], I was taken near to Montenegro [Tutin]. [I] spent three days [there] and was sent money [to be able to return back to Horgos].”

While low level workers seemed to be subjected to policing methods restricting their ability to operate, without ‘relationships with border officials’ being built over time through ‘bribing police’, the crews would not have been able to operate as visibly, or as frequent and as many as they smuggled⁵⁸ (Nimkar and Mohammadi, 2023). Investigative reports revealed corruption that went to the higher echelons of the Serbian state (Dragojlo, 2022; 2023). It was brought to the attention of the public that the ‘cultural mediator’ (translator) worked with the commissariat as a power broker between the state and the Syrian working crews in the Sombor area. The report (ibid, 2022), takes quotes from Syrian guides and

⁵⁸ official Hungarian data reports 10,000 apprehensions alone in the 37th week of the year (11-17th September 2023))

coordinators, revealing how it was impossible to operate without the translator's⁵⁹ blessing (Name: Alen Basil⁶⁰), otherwise the police will intervene on Basil's request. By July 2022, Basil lost his influence over the the Syrian crews after the investigative report was published⁶¹.

Yet the numbers of 'passengers' moving across northern Serbia did not fall after the exposé of Basil⁶². Moreover the control working crews operating in 'Little Syria' had over mobility was no less influential than after his deposition. It bears mentioning here, when interviewing Anna (long time NGO worker and activist in the north) remembers a different border ecosystem before Basil. She remembers a crew from Pakistan as far back as 2018 near the same location AR was living and working until they were forced out by a crew from Afghanistan, she reminisces, 'back then it was slow to cross, they [Pakistani smugglers] arranged for people to take a ride in the Camion (truck game). It was not until after Basil was arrested things started to be more organised."

Undoubtedly Basil played a role in laying the ground work for establishing state-working crew links at the institutional level, but by the spring of 2023 this was a 'border ecosystem' that had matured into a much more diffused set of relationships between border workers and the local police agencies on both sides of the border (Jones, 2012), with multiple layers of power, influence and control with people like AR and John at the bottom of the pecking order. Compared with what Richter (2021) found in the Magreb, where 'the temporary nature and volatility' of border work(ers) 'do not align with the idea of the migrant

⁵⁹ Names: Alen Basil has now been added to the UK's international sanctions list

⁶⁰ Basil is still under investigation after arrest on suspicion of being involved in people-smuggling and the illegal possession of weapons reported by Dragjolo (Feb 2025) in the Balkan Insight

⁶¹according to Sasa Dragojlo, the leading investigator at Balkan Insight tells me in an interview. This was further echoed by Anna (7 years plus experience in migration and human smuggling related NGO work in Northern Serbia)

⁶² refer to the Hungarian border crossing statistics as a reference point:

[https://www.police.hu/hu/hirek-es-informaciok/hatarinfo/illegalis-migracio-alakulasa?](https://www.police.hu/hu/hirek-es-informaciok/hatarinfo/illegalis-migracio-alakulasa?weekly_migration_created[min]=2022-01-01+00:00:00&weekly_migration_created[max]=2023-01-01+00:00:00)

[weekly_migration_created\[min\]=2022-01-01+00:00:00&weekly_migration_created\[max\]=2023-01-01+00:00:00](https://www.police.hu/hu/hirek-es-informaciok/hatarinfo/illegalis-migracio-alakulasa?weekly_migration_created[min]=2022-01-01+00:00:00&weekly_migration_created[max]=2023-01-01+00:00:00)

smuggler as a highly organised transnational criminal', border work is sustained by local knowledge and power relations produced from the everyday precarious transnational labour of border work(ers) (ibid, P.1444). The relationships cannot be disentangled from transnational flows in the illicit economy, and the amount of social capital (local knowledge) to create the infrastructure for crossing the fence cannot be attributed to a single man (Basel).

This became evident on several occasions when my team and I would hear of evictions in which passengers were taken to transit camps in the south, while the working crew members were spared from forcible removal by the police. Units of police (gendarmerie, local and border police departments), and crews at the bottom rung did not always produce adversarial relations, like in the case of John's crew. For instance, passengers seemed to be offered as 'collateral' to the police when units came to 'evict' and forcibly remove them from the squats and encampments. One mid-August morning, before me and my team arrived at Ranch, we were told upon arrival an eviction happened. One of the 'passengers' at the squat managed to evade the police, and relays the morning's events to me, 'the police come and take 100 persons this morning with the pullman to camp [in the south].' One of the long term coordinators from the doctors NGO informs me, "[nearly] everyday police come to this squat, they [working crew] don't get arrested themselves and the passengers are taken [to another camp or to be detained]."

Both local and central state authorities are attracted to maintain their social capital with the border worker as much as the worker needs them, but this reality is negotiated with the intention to maintain power relations. This 'second form of sovereignty' at the everyday level is about creating 'power from within the system to be able to benefit and distribute wealth and power' (Cold-Ravnkilde, 2021, p.14). The representatives of sovereignty across

nearly all borders to various degrees, transgress their supposed duties, through everyday practices of corruption. Cold-Ravnkilde (ibid) argues security forces in Mali, have interest to work ‘within’ smuggling — operating in the grey zone of sovereignty. The rationale that works within the grey zone for the state is for mobility to be mobile (not contained), hence racialised border workers are exploited to do the most risky, everyday practices that the state cannot be seen to be doing, in accordance with ‘local’ state co-option. While corruption takes place, central governments do their best to deploy police units, in keeping with the thinly veiled border performance of state power. The performance is for the eyes and ears of the local and national citizenry and as a ‘inter-state’ currency’ in the international political arena (Bhattacharyya, 2024, p.83). Through forced eviction and displacement within the (EU’s) externalised territory (EU-Serb relations) the everyday social capital and affective relationships between the ‘street-level’ sovereign and the border worker(s) were contradictory and unclear. What can be gleaned from several months of observation and interviews is that the border worker is made expendable for mobility and the security state-capital nexus (Anderson, 2014).

These relational capacities that generates social capital are as vital as bodily endurance. Much of what constitutes smuggling labour is situated, social capital built over time; knowing where and when to move, how to avoid hostile actors, whom to trust and which emotional mode to turn on (compassion, and or dominance/intimidation, anger and frustration). Yet despite their crucial role in sustaining mobility, these workers are not spared the violence often assumed to fall solely on “people on the move.” In Serbia, counter-smuggling operations seemed to at times, but not always, indiscriminately target border workers, making little distinction between the migrant and the worker, passengers and guides, food vendors and barbers. This collapse of categories underlines how survival labour at the border is not just criminalised—it is racialised and violently erased as

informal support systems and work, as a response to state (in)action (Davies, Isakjee, Dhesi, 2017) and corruption (Suber, 2024; Nimkar and Mohammadi, 2023).

Subverting the Infrastructures of Mobility control

Spatial practices enacted by the crews were not confined to the so-called “informal” encampment or squat. Illicit economies routinely subvert and appropriate state-controlled infrastructures and regulatory systems. The infrastructures and personnel of mobility control are not simply obstacles to be evaded; they are reconfigured as resources. Their intended function as sanitised infrastructures of exception (Keshavarz, 2024; see also Minca, 2015 on camp studies) becomes, in practice, an opportunity structure—absorbed into the operational logics of the border economy. Camps are part of ‘transit life’, especially for those made immobile by restrictive border policies, although their ‘temporariness’ are made permanent in the archipelago of the border lands.

Camp studies has developed from Agamben’s (2003) conceptualisation of the camp as a tool of spatial exception, stripping political and social subjectivities to its ‘bare’ biological life. Martin, Minca and Katz (2019, p.744) point to the symbiotic relationship institutionalised transit camps have with ‘informal encampments’ in an ‘archipelago of camps’ along the Balkan route. Moreover camps are where migrant’s autonomy builds into solidarity and resistance (Ansar and Khaled, 2021) and hybrid-sovereignty in occupied Palestine (see. Ramadan, 2013), while also acting as arenas of protest in response to bureaucratic violence(s) (deportation regimes see. Rosenberger, Stern and Merhaut, 2018). When it comes to the illicit economies of transit, camps close to borders and border(towns) and lands (at the time of research camps in or near Pirot, Presevo, Sombor, Subotica, Sarajevo, Bihać) all had their own working crews present (See. McGee and Pelham, 2018; Tinti and Reitano, 2016 on smugglers as agents of support). During the counter-smuggling

campaign, a 'transition' phase (late October 2023 to winter 2024), led to an increase in reports of some of the working crews to turn to unscrupulous acts of extortion that have lasted to the present day along the route.

Not only did subverting the daily running of camp life serve to control mobility, but for those who spent years living the border regime, heightened restrictions to do border work, led to some finding alternative—dare I say creative—ways to extract capital from passengers moving through the camp system. This helped border workers sustain their own survival along the route. It was also a result of the state's abandonment, or what Davies, Isakjee and Dhesi (2017) term 'violent inaction' as humanitarian agencies in coalition with the state⁶³ take a laissez faire approach to service provision (insufficient shelter, psycho-social support and healthcare) within and outside camp space⁶⁴ make way for alternative structures. Long term camp inmates would mention a lack of calorie in take and the feeling of the body wasting away. This material condition only exacerbated the imperative for economies of survival to take place through the camp to earn money, food or gain a resource for trade to be converted into whatever you wanted. The intensification of immobility and working crew criminalisation left a vacuum for coercive practices to flourish in moments of opportunism (see below).

By the time I entered the field (May 2023) it was well established that 'every smuggling group, had their people in the camps.' Sasa Dragjolo (investigative Journalist) during the interviews mentioned the 'groups' managed to have 'preferential status'. He goes on to say they had pretty much a free pass on how they run the camp:

⁶³ or in the case of the Serbian Government, no international humanitarian agencies present. The Sole governance of the camp system is the Commissariat

⁶⁴ criminalisation of health care provision from activists and local actors or outside of state-humanitarian sanction

“There are [disclosed commissariat] reports that some of them [working crew members] had better [sleeping] units, you know, some fancy stuff, completely divided from other people. So that was the relationship they had with the commissariat staff⁶⁵, they [working crews] managed to take control of the [camps]... I mean, not like take control, like ordering people, but it was subtle.”

Lena (social worker from Subotica) whom worked in the camps in the north of Serbia remembers the camp system developing its own power structures, based on the heritage and familiarity of working crews:

“People from Afghanistan took over Subotica camp in 2021... In Subotica [camp] the Afghan crews did not let anyone in if “you're an Arab”... if they were accepted they didn't let them [Moroccan and Syrian] charge their phones. But in Sombor camp [in the Little Syria area] it was the other way around, Syrian crew held power, only allowing services in the camp to their passengers.”

People were placed in transit camps based on their nationality or heritage. In the west (majority Syrian) with the camp in Subotica in the north (majority Afghan). Anna (Serbian activist) claims the Commissariat created a segregated camp system in northern Serbia, and the division reflected the spatial practices of the working crews that Lena (above) experienced. Despite the state's hand in shaping power structures from below, passengers themselves narrated how working crews organised their labour power based on the populations from the same or similar heritage (cultural affinity and language etc. play a role). One respondent relays how in Pirot camp (south Serbia) in the winter of 2023-24, most of the groups attempting the route needed to go through interlocutors put in place by different smuggling crews. Sala, a one-time Moroccan guide whom decided to withdraw his labour from the working crew after a successful attempt (as the guide of a group of six people) travelling from Turkey to Serbia, recalls the collection of one time payments from new arrivals:

⁶⁵ Serbian state's Commissariat are in charge of accommodating people on the move

Sala

In every, in every camp, there is a network. There is a network of smugglers. There is Moroccan, there is Afghan, there is Syrian network.

LJ

And they hold the power?

Sala

Yes. The power, because they have, they have weapon inside the camp.

LJ

Who is doing that?

Sala

It's, it's the follower of the boss. Have five people or ten people inside the camp, they come to you, they said to you, "you have to give us 50 euro."

LJ

To stay in the camp?

Sala

Yeah, yeah, you have to give.

LJ

To be in the camp?

Sala

Yeah, yeah. You stay in the camp,

LJ

Okay, it's just one payment?

Sala

One payment for all, for all. Any time, all the time. Moroccan people work with Moroccan immigrants, refugees like us. Moroccan, yes, they see us. You cannot go to a Syrian people. A Moroccan people cannot go to, to go to a Syrian to tell him, "give me 50 euro". Or Afghanian [sic], no.

Transit camps were also used by working crews as recruiting hubs. Protracted amounts of time stuck at the border means long days and multiple attempts going on ‘game’⁶⁶. After several months, some of the men and boys are finding themselves involved in petty roles with the working crew. Camps acted like check points, between arduous border crossings, whether on foot or with working crew expertise. Elements of social control from places of origin slipped into the working crew’s repertoire, with references to organised crime in Morocco. Working crews were named by passengers as ‘mafia’⁶⁷ from home. Salah details a typical scenario experienced by many who are stuck in the camp with limited resources to be able to pay a smuggler:

Salah

It is easy to go [join Working Crew], I just ask him [working crew member], he told me that in Serbia. If you want to, to work with that guy [smuggler]. Like I said to you. Kazawi. Some of his followers, asked me to go with him [sic]. I said, “I don't have money..... I don't have the price that you say to me, 1,500.” He said, “you can ask him. I give you here a number, his number to work with him inside the camp [in return for being smuggled].” I said, “no! I don't want this.”

LJ

To work inside the camp?

Salah

Yes, Inside the camp.

LJ

And what kind of [roles]?

Salah

⁶⁶ ‘The Game’ is not only the autonomous movement of groups of migrants as seen in the film ‘Shadow Game’ — the term is also referred to when one travels under the supervision of a guide or driver. I argue nearly every facet of social relations along the route translated into a survival game; whether one was crossing borders for days or when one was ‘hustling’ to make a few euros (more on this in the next section of this chapter — ‘petty economies’)

⁶⁷The term “*mafia*” was widely used by people crossing the region as a derogatory label for human smuggling operatives. In global discourse, *mafia* functions as an umbrella term that signals not only involvement in transnational criminal networks, but also connotes moral depravity and, in some contexts, associations with banditry or predatory violence. In the case of crew members operating in camps to recruit guides, the term *mafia* is used here in its vernacular sense. It should not be taken to imply that these recruiters were significant actors within a global criminal syndicate. Rather, the label reflects the moralised and often accusatory language through which migrants themselves interpreted and described the informal hierarchies and power relations shaping the camp economy.

to recruit people. I ask you, I say, for example, “Lawrence, you want to go with me”. That's the price, I give you here a number.

This was not exclusively a Moroccan experience. Ahmed makes it clear that reputation and crime from Syria was communicated into the working crew's social control methods:

“Then they took us from Belgrade to around two and a half hours to Sombor camp. There is a lot of mafia, but the biggest one, it was Buseraya, start by B. Buseraya, they are like a family from the east of Syria, from the Deir el-zor. You know, [until] we went there [Sombor camp], they say, “okay...from Turkey, from Istanbul, till come Sombor”, they are angel. It's angel, angel, okay.

when we reach there [Sombor camp], they say, at first, you have to pay 100 euro. We have someone, he will receive the transfer money from which country you like to here [Sombor]. We start to ask our families to pay money for us. They are like mafia, okay. They came one by one. He comes to you [sic] [approaches Mustafa and all his travel companions], he said, “give me five euro!”, [but] I wanted to drink tea. “Give me money.” [says the working crew member].”

The global nomenclature associated with criminality; ‘mafia’ was regularly narrated by migrants crossing the balkan route to refer to unscrupulous acts from some of the smugglers — there was always the dichotomy drawn up between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ smugglers, from narratives of smugglers themselves and migrants I met along the route. In the case of Syrian crews, Ahmed had it in his mind the family that was in control would refer to practices of control and intimidation which only befitted the reputation of the family name back in Syria. Nearly all the crew members I met at The Factory distributions were from Deir-el-zoor. One Syrian passengers shouted to me in a brazen and chauvinistic manner: “[pointing] they are uneducated, simple people from the country”. These young men were servicing squats, while testimonies and news reports coming out of the Sombor camp was that the Deir-ez-zor families involved in smuggling exchanged their reputations as powerful brokers in the civil war (Dukhan, 2019; Mazur, 2020), into a social control mechanism in Serbia.

What emerges from testimonies is a complex picture of camp planning that segregated people into heritage and geographical background. Over time, the camps were appropriated into their own systems of economic and social activity, rather than a Foucauldian or Agambenian system of total state control. Rather commissariat are poorly regulated and build relations with long term crew members. The spaces became connected to the wider 'smuggling ecology' in Vojvodina, as camps acted as recruiting spaces for smuggling labour and potential passengers. The social control element verged on practices that attempted to extort through intimidated; one of the Syrian crews used an influential family name to scare passengers into paying for unforeseen or paid for services. Whether these individuals were affiliated to the family or not, the name for Ahmad was enough to be cautious. The global nomenclature of mafia was used by many passengers to describe working crew members, especially those claiming to be connected to powerful families in the country associated with fighting in the civil war. Far from being passive spaces, camps function as contested arenas where multiple forms of power—state, humanitarian, and claims of transnational criminality and civil war intersect and co-produce precarious orders which are intensified in moments of state oppression (for instance during Serbia's major counter smuggling operation in late 2023). Working crews, organised along lines of heritage and affiliation, operate through both coercion and collaboration, weaving extractive practices by subverting state run facilities, while blurring the lines between solidarity and exploitation of migrants in transit. In the absence—or calculated neglect—of state and humanitarian provision, these improvised infrastructures become central to the reproduction of life and mobility at the border, revealing the camp not only as a site of containment but also of racialised labour, opportunism (during increase bordering practices), and survival for those institutionalised by the border regime. Not only was the

camp a site of extraction, for the young, inexperienced border worker, survival took on practices that reflected their lack of power in the smuggling ecosystem.

Petty economies in moments of (Im)mobility

Whilst spending several months (February to August 2024) with young Moroccans and Algerians in the Una Sana canton, Bosnia, I found most were barely of adult age, and moving across this section of the route with little money to cross, meant their quality of travel across the route was remarkably precarious in comparison to other groups. Inequality exists along the route, with some able to pay for services and mobility while others languish along the route for long periods of time. Another researcher at the time, jovially, remarks on how the Turkish are ‘soft’ — not cut out for what the Moroccan guys have to go through (protracted itineraries, border violence, sleeping rough, in and out of the transit camp). For instance, Turkish and Kurdish transit groups were more likely to be able to pay for the hotel above the bus station whilst waiting for their connection to be smuggled, whilst the Moroccans and Algerians would be downstairs in the coach station lobby using the plug sockets to charge power banks and mobile phones and/or to catch a few minutes of warmth and shelter. The Turkish had the capital to pay their way across the route, plus visa free, direct flights to Sarajevo, gave them an ‘advantage’, cutting out the Turkey-Bulgaria-Serbian part of the route.

The political economies from places of origin and their relationship to European border regimes determines one’s travel experience. Money talks, it buys quality of travel and time, especially with the increase in anti-smuggling security (MMC and PRAB, 2024). Not only are political economies a factor in the quality and standard of services, it very much depended on the conditions at the time in one’s country, making clear links to fortified borders and failed development economies (for a critical intervention on failed

development projects in West Africa and co-producing clandestinity and border regimes (see Andersson, 2014). After more than a decade of civil war in Syria, the collapse of the state led to widespread capital flight among households. Some of this capital contributes toward financing mobility, with families spending between 8,000 and 10,000 euros on smuggling packages to cover the labour costs of land routes and surplus made from the fee (Syrian Observer, 2016). Sam, a Moroccan who spent a period living in Istanbul and working online as a teacher, became friends with several Syrians in Turkey's most populated city. He explains the difference between their experiences and his own:

“we [Moroccans] do not have war, Syrians can pay for smuggling services, they have thousands of euros on them”. This capital is not simply a means of escape; it becomes an investment—a hedged bet for future residency costs settling in ‘Europe’ and the inevitable moments excluded from waged labour markets.”

Wars and dispossession in one region led to capital injected into another area, in this case millions into the transit economy, a ‘transit fix’ of capital (Harvey, 1991; Bird and Schmidt, 2023; and see Gilmore on the ‘prison fix’ published in 2007). Moreover, the political economies of ‘security capital’ creates more bordering practices increasing the costs of transit (Lori and Schilde, 2021). There are multiple hidden and exorbitant costs woven into the fabric of disruptive bordering practices along the clandestine journey. Not only are human smuggling costs incurred, each micro step taken along the routes are commodified: a 20-euro taxi ride to buy food not provided in the transit camp; a replacement smartphone after border guards seize or destroy it; a fee to sleep in a squat near Sombor before attempting to cross into Hungary. As one of the long term smugglers that had been working the south eastern corridor since 2010, sternly warns me the land route will consume you if you are not financially prepared:

“you need at least 5,000 euros and three months to complete the [south eastern] route. You’re stupid if you come without enough money, you join gangs [out of the necessity to survive], and [you will] pay with your life, no other opportunity [available]” (Interview Nov. 2024).

For the Moroccans cohort, financial prospects was the reasons why they left in the first place. Many came from some of the poorest neighbourhoods in Fes and Casablanca, the younger ones referred to ‘Harraga’, a term meaning to burn, in reference to burning identification documents to evade deportation from Europe. These resistance narratives born from poverty back home and breaching borders in EUrope are turned into discourses of hope and sacrifice (Alouache’s film ‘Harragas’ 2009). The experiences of journeys taken (across the mediterranean) are communicated through music and literature and was always part of the sound tracks I would hear in the squats and encampments, and during our ‘solidarity parties’ with transit groups. Migrant youth communicate their individual struggles through rap music that displayed the rags to riches story line which often stirred the imagination of youth living their lives in Europe like their idols. To be mobile ‘street wise’ sensibility is applied to an ongoing game of survival. Mustafa and Ayoub translated the ‘hustle’ in the border regime context, when they playfully say to me (with massive grins on their faces), how they stole a pair of trainers they were wearing from the local market.

For many of the north African contingent, exposure to life on the route, was determined firstly by their relative poverty to pay for smuggling services as the border regime tightened in Serbia (post October 2023). Immobile populations depended on the (petty) economies of transit for subsistence — ‘hustle’. The adolescent boys and young men lived off the demands of richer migrants. Border ‘hustles’ went on, with some items valued as in high

demand in the border land: buying (and Stealing) phones and clothes, money transfer ‘runners’ taking their cut (commission), extra goods and services not able to be brought from the camp, buying and selling of maps that plotted the newly pinned routes that traversed the Bosnian-Croatian forest, ‘hawking’, and soliciting petty cash outside the supermarket (for an ethnography on the migrants mitigating their precarious condition with petty ‘crime’ see Vuilleumier, 2024). At the time (late 2023 to late 2024), Bosnia was a safe haven in comparison to Serbia, one could move relatively ‘free’ on public transport, and between dominant citizen spaces and governed migrant spaces (camps and smuggler run facilities and squats). Some migrants left Bihać for Sarajevo for cash-in-hand work to sustain along the route.

One big issue facing migrant populations was access to cash. To receive cash, one would have to take 20 euro (each way) taxi rides to withdraw from the local Western Union. En-route economies thrive off cash, or the Hwala system. This created commission services for longer term crew members, living off petty cuts from the western union. This service was in high demand because Lipa camp is located more than 10 kilometres from Bihać, and basic services necessary for prolonged stays were largely absent. Border workers were therefore able to profit by offering services based on the fact people on the move did not cross with documents to be able to withdraw from western union. Even for those that had spent considerable time between Lipa camp and Bihać town, reliance on such services made for an extortionate transit experience. Samir, exclaims to me with an outburst of resentment and frustration at the working crew that provided the service outside Lipa⁶⁸ in the summer of 2024:

⁶⁸ Lipa Camp is a spatially isolated reception centre 23 kilometres from the town of Bihac. Everyday me and my team would meet people at the bus station waiting for taxis to take their group for 20 euros a ride. Some used the service to earn some cash in the Sarajevo doing odd cleaning jobs

“He's asking about transferring money [pointing to one of his friends]. I told him we don't have another solution except for T [name], and his fucking people [Moroccan Working Crew]. They take a lot, like 30%, he wants to send 100 euro to them, I will give him 60 or 70 euro, it's fucked up, 60-70 euro for example, you send 100 euro, you get 60 euro or 70 euro, ok, 60 or 70 like 30%-40%”

On top of the stress of exorbitant ‘administration fees’, releasing money can take days or even weeks to organise with family and friends from places of origin. Many migrants rely on the identification of either local people or working crew members—those who possess documents—to withdraw cash from an already extortionate Western Union service. Transiting without documents was the rule rather than the exception; most either lost or “burned” their passports, or had them confiscated by border guards—often as part of bribe-taking practices, according to multiple testimonies. In this precarious financial landscape, everyday monetary transactions are mediated through a network of ‘low-level’ fixers—conduits who provide services in exchange for a cut.

To illustrate the risks involved with these types of services, workers carrying western transfers between Bihać town and the camp, withdrawing thousands of euros through a Hawala account via Western Union was robbed. One long term smuggling living in the town describes how “thousands of euros that did not even belong to him” was taken. These informal financial services form a critical component of the illicit economies of transit but are not without risks attached for both service provider and the person on the move putting his trust in the service.

The mostly young Moroccan crew active in Bihać town were not visibly close to the police or any form of authority, only to their own internal hierarchy. Often young men were

complaining about the local Moroccan working crew 'boss' (Harish) giving them poor information. According to Samir, he was told by Harish's crew that camions were heading to Slovenia and not stopping in Croatia. The service costed around 100-200 euros, but seemed to be in vain when the same exhausted faces would reappear in Bihać town after failed attempts to climb under the steel girded chassis.

Frustration amongst Moroccan youths would summarise their experience in Bosnia. I find Samir, in the centre of the town, slightly tipsy drunk on his way to confront Harish's Crew and ask for a refund, it turns out, Harish's crew are 'organising' the camion attempts. Their commodity was 'information' as to which camion was not going to be checked by the drivers and border guards. Although, encouraging stories of guys making it to Slovenia were communicated to some of the activists and myself, most eventually made it on foot following shared pins (sometimes paid for) of the latest routes and after multiple harrowing experiences with Croatian border guards.

A couple of hundred euros was a relatively cheap service when compared to the structured and laboured services in the north of Serbia. Even so, many of the Moroccans and Algerians could not afford to pay for the services from Harish. One of the guys that was coming regularly into the Jesuit centre in Bihać town in the spring and summer months of 2024 was Mustafa. As we stroll on to the local mobile engineer shop to pick up his phone, I ask him the usual introductory questions; where he was going (usually a dream destination one had in mind) and what he wanted to do when he arrived, he replies in broken English, 'I want to be a pizza maker in Milano'. No matter how humble his dream seemed, I wondered how realistic they were. I found Mustafa and his group needed a lot of psycho-

social support. Life along the route takes its toll on young minds, and Lyrica⁶⁹ was the drug of choice to pass the time and the torment. Many of the guys say they were proscribed Lyrica in the camps (see. NNK ‘Lyrica’ blog, author Gomez, 2023), whilst some developed addiction problems from places of origin (Portela et al., 2023). After we pick up his phone from the engineer, I remembered I needed to buy a new SIM. Mustafa takes me to the kiosk and insists on the red packaged SIM. The card cost 4KM (2 euros) for 16gb, a very cheap price compared with the ‘tourist’ sim deal I was buying. But there was a ‘special’ procedure to receive the 16gb deal required a long code. Living protracted periods en-route, living on next to nothing, means a few ‘tricks’ are important if it means saving 1 euro here and there.

It was only the previous day I found him at the local drop-in centre in central Bihać. He was surrounded by four other guys, frantically discussing the bruises he had received on his arms and back, after fallen victim to an attack from a smuggling crew. The crew were taking territory at the border through various coercive practices (direct violence). At first, I thought he was part of a transit group that went on ‘free game’ — trying their chances without the blessing of the working crew he had received the beating from, or the ‘protection’ of a guide. It turns out Mustafa was ‘the’ guide of a group of Moroccans. It was made a matter of fact or normalised, “you are required to pay them [working crew], if you’re not with them, you are beaten and robbed”, Samir confirms to me whilst Mustafa is showing his bruises.

It is not difficult to distinguish the guide from the rest. I later heard Mustafa, “gets everything he needs; sim cards, food, power banks” in preparation for the multiple days it

⁶⁹ Lyrica is the street name for Pregabalin, a prescription medication used for neuropathic pain, epilepsy and anxiety disorder.

Esp Moroccan youth I met in Bosnia in 2024 were taking ‘Lyrica’ daily, some say it gave them sharp focus and confidence during ‘the game’ — crossing border.

may take to guide his group deep into Croatia. The money to pay for the items came from the 'boss', Harish. I later find out Harish, was also a young guy, no older than late 20s, and was incredibly scared by how deep he had entered the smuggling crew 'lifeworld'. For Mustafa, he was at the bottom of the rung, most of the time high on Lyrica. His body was cannon fodder for the Moroccan crew in Bihać; his body power made exploitable through the risks involved in passing this section of forest next to the Croatian border. Multiple testimonies and one media investigation (Dragojlo and Siviero, 2025) evidences locations, perpetrators, and tactics used in an attempt to territorialise the border land forest space. It was only just beginning to become known to activists and myself when I witnessed what happened to Mustafa. However, for the Moroccans, most smugglers in Bihać, and the local police, the crew's involvement in hostage-taking had been common knowledge since the end of winter 2024. By April 2025, the story had been reported in Balkan Insight (ibid).

Periods of immobility in Bosnia's Una Sana canton opens the door for precarious forms of petty labour shaped by inequalities during mobility and access to resources. Young men and boys, rely on street-level hustles, informal services, and survival strategies to endure life along the route. With little money and limited options, they serve the needs of wealthier migrants and navigate social relations with local smuggling crews. These dynamics echo the opportunism described in and around the camp system—where scarcity, neglect, and bordering practices open space for forms of organisation and labour. Just as camps become arenas for extractive practices, so too do the surrounding towns and transit corridors. Mustafa's experience embodies this entanglement—trapped between addiction, exploitation, and the burden of guiding others, his body becomes a resource in the wider economies of transit. Mobility in the transit space is largely structured by the political and social situation facing the regions and countries of origin, whether that is civil war (capital flight) or economic deprivation (poverty). What emerges are racialised forms

of petty economic activity attached to a state-humanitarian apparatus that intends to penalise rather than support. The gaps left by inactive institutional agencies and departments are filled by the resources of people on the move—often drawing on the savings of households or entire communities back ‘home’—creating the conditions for multiplication of labour and economic life. In this context, the intersecting regimes of deprivation, control, and unequal mobility, structured by global citizenship regimes are found in the peripheries of routes and borders.

Conclusion

The stories of the men featured in this chapter offers a partial light into labour practices that sustained mobility and life along routes and how racialised labour cannot be disentangled from European bordering (see. Press, 2021 on hidden labour in essential jobs) and historic dispossession (Mezzadra and Neilsen, 2013). Border work is a manifestation of the European capitalist ‘core’ not able to absorb populations from dispossessed part of the globe. For some ‘groups who cannot easily transform their body power into labour’, their lives are deemed ‘surplus, marginalised but not excluded from capitalist systems’ (Rajaram, 2018). What I found along the routes and borders were (mostly) men and boys from ‘populations vulnerable to non-waged forms of value extraction’ (Bhattacharyya, 2024) turning their labour to ‘shadow econom[ies]’, or what Rajaram (2018) called the ‘dark underbelly of capitalism’ at Europe’s peripheries (externalised borders and routes, esp outside the Schengen).

Within the context of bordering, Bird and Schmid (2023) have already underlined the role of liberal humanitarianism to manage surplus populations for the state within a system of global capital accumulation and border externalisation. While they make a welcomed addition to theories of bordering under the analytical power of ‘racial capitalism’, the

contribution made in this chapter steers focus on migrants being ‘institutionalised’ into working crews as part of a wider expansion of racialised (illicit) labour in the trade of illegalised mobility and service provisions needed to sustain life along the route. In this context of labour exploitation, border work can be equated to other ‘dirty’, and ‘hidden’ forms of labour (sex, domestic, street vending). The irony is ‘working crews’ were (co)producing the regimes of their own exclusion whilst putting their lives on the line.

The story of the border workers talks to the current broader structural tension leading migration security debates today; the framing of ‘human smuggling’ as solely the work of crime networks from dangerous parts of the world (Sanchez, 2015). Centring the stories of migrant-smuggling as a survival labour in a world of dispossession and illegality positions ‘the smuggler’ on the ‘front line’ of border work, what I call the ‘dirty work’ of mobility (facilitation) within a political economy of borders. Framing ‘human smuggling’ as ‘border work’ not only shifts but broadens the analytical lens. Moving attention away from technocratic policy, crime and justice explanations and methodologies and to the everyday material level of border work, contributes in explaining smugglers and smuggling as the structuring of surplus labour. Border work(ers) are foundational to the social reproduction of border spaces, their practices and faculties — requiring body and emotional, social and cultural capital are found valuable for externalisation states. This moves the conversation one tiny step forward with a set of abolitionist principles that conceptualises border work in a broader discussion on precarious labour, within a wider critique of ‘Racial Capitalism’ (Bhattacharyya, 2018; 2024).

Moreover, border work is a collective endeavour, their labour power is stronger in numbers, to the point where (at times) it turns into coercion, intimidation and actual direct violence. But this has to be contextualised; border regimes are built upon the

foundations of a politics of survival (DeLeon, 2024) and state violence. With the increase in the political economy of security being applied to migration control, intensifies the high stakes, and capital flight injected into the transit space, thus this capital concentrates in these spaces for short periods and dictates social relations, based on the someone's productive capacity in the 'illicit' transit economies from below.

Border work is at the intersection of crime and migration (Achilli et al., 2024). In the contemporary context, they are often treated as bedfellows (see Stumpf, 2006 on 'crimmigration'), particularly within the realm of externalisation policies. For example, pre-accession assistance programs like IPA III for Serbia and Bosnia—designed to facilitate EU political integration and market access—are framed in terms of combating transnational 'gangs.' This framing, however, obscures the structural conditions that create the value of smuggling labour and conceals the everyday realities and risks that shape the trajectories of migrant youth involved in these practices. When zooming into the everyday material manifestation of the border and routes, opens a whole set of collective and individual labour practices that fill in the gaps of humanitarian and state (in)action and violence (Davies, Isakjee and Dhesi, 2017).

When labour power is no longer valued by capital and welfarist political economies in EUrope have been eroded, subordinate groups are made productive in the illicit economies of the capitalist system, thus a huge part of late capitalist economic activity (Spaan and Van Naerssen, 2017; Castells, 2000). The relative surplus populations living and working the borders and routes are foundational to the functioning of porous bordering regimes in the face of security capital (see Lori and Schilde, 2021 on security capital role in migration control). As noted earlier, in the context of intensified securitization, the everyday practices of border workers (the Working Crew) not only facilitate movement but also

sustain social reproduction along routes. These survival economies emerge and thrive precisely because state-sanctioned legal and economic pathways into and through Europe's political and economic centres remain largely inaccessible.

Building on the preceding discussion of the economic and social dimensions of bordering in northern Serbia and northwestern Bosnia, the thesis now turns to the *digitalities* of the working crew's communication practices. These crews reproduce, through their own social media video broadcasts, visual narratives of border crossings, routes, and encounters with state security. In doing so, internal subcultural tensions and forms of intra-communalism, crafted to online audiences perform dramaturgic and mundane storylines that document life and labour at the borders.

Chapter 5 Visual Representation and Subterranean Narrative of the Borders

Introduction

I am driving in the car with three other activists on our way to a squatted building close to the border with Croatia on a cold December afternoon in 2023. It had been used for at least the last four years as a central hub for people crossing into Croatia. Back in 2020 it was almost exclusively frequented by young men from Afghanistan working the border and routes in the far south West of Vojvodina.

This winter I am passing through on my way to Bosnia where most of the movement of people had been re-routed. Everyone was forcibly relocated from the north of Serbia, to the south west of Vojvodina next to Croatia, as a result of the ‘final’ counter-smuggling operation in late October ’23. The Adsecvi transit camp, located outside the border town of Šid, was full with people relocated from the main transit camps and smuggler run encampments dotted in and near Sombor and Subotica. Syrian working crews that had managed to not get arrested during the operation were relocated to Adasecvi camp to adapt to the state’s re-routing of mobility.

Finally we pull up in the car, nothing seems to have changed since I was last here in 2020, except the place is much quieter than I remember — no one is to be seen outside the building — not surprising considering the sub-zero temperatures that day. Suddenly two white puppies run over to greet us—excited and full of energy. I then scan around to see the power that was once connected to the mains supply directly from the electric pylon had been disconnected. Before, when I was last here in 2020 you would hear the loud buzz and crack of the improvised electric system supplying the inhabitants of the white house squat. This afternoon, it was silent, the stillness in the air was made more apparent by how the

snow softens an environment, not only visually but sonically — a white acoustic blanket that made the squatted house feel calm and serene compared to my last visit.

I make a speculative shout to see if anyone was “at home!”, while the activists group prepared the clothes for distribution. After the second call, eventually a head pops out of one of the first-floor boarded windows; a man with a distinctly long face, and equally long hair down to his shoulders, probably in his mid-20s, which I later find out to be known as ‘Commander’⁷⁰. I would later find his face on one of the ‘BWK crew’ TikTok accounts. He signals for us to come inside. We enter from the back, there’s no door, but nothing blocking it. We climb up a precarious staircase, no bannister for support, and only the light from whiteness of snow that day to guide me and team up to the first floor.

Upstairs, we are greeted by Commander and one of his crew mates. There are five people huddled round a fire on the first floor; three passengers from Morocco and two ‘workers’ running the squat. The two workers are in a relatively warm and somewhat comfortable small room, with sofas and thick blankets. Next door, two larger rooms are full of smoke, with a fire blazing openly. The smoke is heavy and intense. It fills both rooms, pressing into our eyes and lungs.

At first, the Moroccan guys are timid. But soon enough we’re chatting—about football, and our places of origin and their travel experiences thus far — the usual small talk, chit chat. It turns out they had met in Turkey. There was a flicker of solidarity—one even made sure another had proper clothes to choose from, before he chose something for himself. Even though the Moroccan three at the squat were relatively well-dressed, their clothing wasn’t suited for the temperatures.

⁷⁰ ‘Commander’ was a name given to and by working crew members from Afghanistan. Crew’s styled themselves as trigger happy (hand gestures of gun shooting and AK47 Tattoos) with sound track of semi-automatic gun fire on their TikTok videos

The smoke was overwhelming. I kept thinking about those who had lived in these smokey conditions for months, even years. One of the workers, K, who wasn't there that day— I heard from one of the activists was still living and working from X location. K was also making his own TikTok videos with emoji signs and hashtags either with or supporting the 'BWK Kriminal group' while he flexes his muscle, with fist clench, and teeth grinding, giving the impression to his audiences the 'hard man' persona. Despite the show of 'strength', I tried to imagine the toll this environment would have on your respiratory system after all those years in such awful conditions. I guess you did have to be 'tough' to live this life all these years.

As we start to get to know the Moroccan passengers a loud shout comes from outside with a trap music beat. As the music becomes progressively louder Achraf⁷¹ appears at the top of the stairs playing the music from a large portable speaker.

PAUSE the scene for a moment!!

I want to take you back to Horgoš, north Serbia, before the major smuggling operation (circa Spring-Summer 2023).

Let me introduce you (the reader) to Aschraf. I would meet him several times at Vitaminka squat, next to Horgoš village, during the spring and summer '23. I will never forget the first time I met him, he boasted that his new trainers were paid with "mafia money." It's hard to forget him—loud, assertive, at times intimidating for a kid that looked barely twenty, with a skinny build. What stuck in my mind was when he 'sized me up', gesturing to me how weak I looked — pointing to my arms. Masculine dominance was asserted in these mostly

⁷¹ All the names of individuals in this chapter have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity

all-male settings, in this bordered existence, avoiding signs of weakness is one way to blend in an unforgiving world of border violence.

That same first day I met Achraf he showed me and my team of volunteers a rap video on YouTube. The rappers in the video featured as the protagonist acting and performing in the video, telling the story of moving across the Balkan Route. One of the north African working crews make an appearance in the video, presented as a collective group that assist the rapper in crossing over Orban's fence. The professionally produced Tunisian rap video portrays the life of the workers in a glamourised version whilst glimpses of social realism of life and work at the borders are presented with authenticity. The harsh conditions of working and moving across the route and border crossing are juxtaposed by the riches they are making from facilitating movement across the fence. It became clear to me after watching the video that Achraf so proudly presented to us was that working crews were not only navigating borders but actively constructing a visual and sonic language around them. The gains made through human smuggling were not purely economic; they carried socio-cultural weight for the young migrants living it. Everyday 'survival labor' was aestheticised through the rap video (DeLeon, 2025; Hagedorn, 2008).

The video chose the scene of Horgoš 2—a known working crew site. By the time I had started field work the place had already been permanently evicted and left inactive, although I do remember during a brief site visit in the summer of 2022, when I was crossing into Hungary, the scenes of what seemed like 100s of people squatting in what would have been the old Yugoslavian transit food service buildings. This area was widely known among migrants, locals, and other working crews as the territory of a mix of Moroccan, Algerian and Tunisian crews. The video cuts between three main visual registers: the artists seated on a sofa in front of a green-screened background that depicted

a desert landscape from where the protagonist starts, other shots dramatising the preparation and execution of a border crossing over Orban's fence and the crew's HQ base (Horgos 2 crossing).

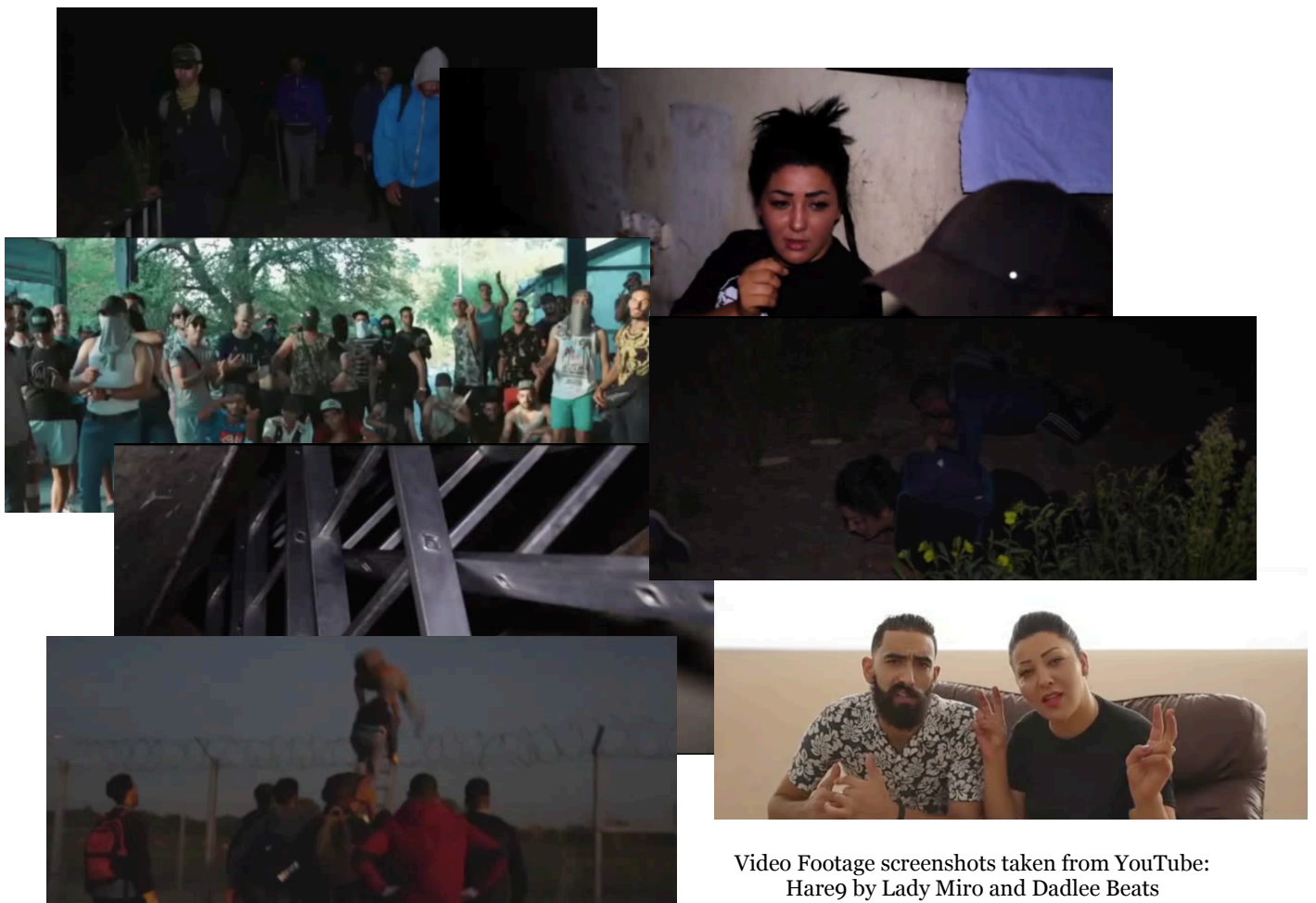
The narrative followed the two protagonist artists; Lady Miro and Dadlee Beats. They acted out the drama of being smuggled by the crew from Horgoš² taken to the crossing point. It turns out Lady Miro was on the route where she is performing on other videos in the town of Subotica. These scenes include realistic depictions of waiting in squatted buildings, sleeping rough under the stars, and moving under cover of darkness—familiar conditions for anyone taking on the route. These were no abstract metaphors but grounded dramatised references to the lived experience of mobility and smuggling work in this part of Serbia.

The video did not shy away from visualising the proceeds supposedly produced from facilitating smuggling in the north of Serbia. Scenes showed masked and unmasked men exchanging cash, handling handguns, and preparing for night border crossings. In one clip, a crew member sits beside a MacBook Pro and a pile of 500-euro notes, set against the backdrop of the squalid living and working conditions of the Horgoš squat. Despite the harshness of the environment, there was a palpable sense of celebration and pride. The crew members posed for the camera, some in balaclavas, others with faces visible, smiling, laughing, and throwing up various hand signs. Then it skips to another frame of a mass of charging power banks, demonstrating preparedness and scale, so important for days walking along the route.

As night fell, the ladders emerge [to scale Orban's fence], marking the transition from preparation to action. Video shots followed Lady Miro and the crew crawling across an open terrain in the dark, approaching the Hungarian fence undetected. The adrenaline of border evasion is the crescendo. Night vision footage shows migrants lying low, metres

away from Hungarian police patrols. The climax comes with a successful crossing, then followed immediately by shaky handheld camera footage of police vehicles approaching the fence and surveillance to indicate how the crew out smarted the authorities. This particular clip reminds me of video footage from a working crew's TikTok content, I had previously observed throughout fieldwork.

I never found out whether Achraf was in the video, he might as well had been, as it was not only narrating the rapper Lady Miro's journey, it told his story of the labour that goes into border breaching at the time. The labour of border work, as I have already argued is emotional and violent, corrupt and carceral, thus danger and daring acts are celebrated and turned into subterranean collation of image and language (Conquergood, 1991).



Video Footage screenshots taken from YouTube:
Hare9 by Lady Miro and Dadlee Beats

What the videos of border infiltration from the working crew depict are spectacular border crossings as well as mundane life at the border. What becomes centre and backdrop is the everyday interactions with the material conditions of borders, narrated through the crew's own labour and their compatriots struggles for mobility. When it comes to theorisations of representation of 'illegal migration', Nicolas De Genova (2002; 2013, p.1181) writes the production of 'illegality' is mediated through a carefully crafted 'scene of ostensible exclusion, in which the purported naturalness and putative necessity of exclusion may be demonstrated and verified, validated and legitimated, redundantly...[with media scenes of] immigration and border policing...enmeshed into a dense weave of discourse and representation'. Building on from DeGenova's conceptual framing of mass media and migration, we find in the videos are frontline crews taking on the aesthetics of 'fetishized figures of 'illegal immigration' (ibid) and (re)-appropriate them into their own subcultural vistas (Brotherton, 2015). As Alexander (2010, in Brotherton 2015) argues, "stigma is never merely a psychological manoeuvre, it is a political act." Thus living labour at the border is turned into cultural performance.

Across a broad spectrum of the working crew's video content, the crew members become the visual protagonists, setting the scene and arranging the materials included in their visual collage. It is not the mass media's framing, although they do share similar spectacular moments, but their own display mixes mythology and iconic status of the crew reflecting the digitalities of mobile commons in the extraordinary commodified worlds of the borderlands across the route (see. Trimikliniotis, Parsanaglou and Tsianos, 2015 digitalities of the mobile commons).

This chapter will first explain my introduction to working crew content and the general range of videos; what they depict and narrate. The Second section, will cover the blending

of social and digital worlds at the borders, the ways in which working crew harnessed TikTok to communicate inter and intra-group violence and solidarity in the political economies of bordering. In the third section, video materials of crews develop a visual spectacle that engages in a material critique with European borders, thus undermining bordering and national sovereignty. Lastly, the branding of crews is used for economic means, while also crews mix branding with social, political and cultural references from places of origin that blend into the everyday materiality of their work and social worlds at the border, thus creators of their own aesthetic. These productions in the profiles of working crew were politicised by nativist politics equating their pathological state to mythologies around their perceived identities, heritage and political histories. Rather than a purely visual analysis of video content, this chapter places the digitalities of working crew image and narrative firmly in the socio-material worlds they lived and worked.

Digitalities and Visual Governance of Borders and Routes

“If you type in [to TikTok] 313, or 515, with ‘Criminal’ or ‘Serbia’, you will find TikToks of the ‘working crew’”

(An activist informs me in the first days of fieldwork — May, 2023)

This was my introduction to the social media of crew members or crew affiliated accounts. In contrast, to investigative journalism and short-hand police reports from local media, TikTok and Facebook videos provided alternative narratives of ‘self-organisation and autonomy’ (See. Brotherton, 2015, p.174 on youth culture and neoliberal economic structuring). People on the move find commonality in the digital sphere, which runs counter to dominant narratives of obedient migrants. This autonomist reading of mobile digitalities from Trimikliniotis, Parsanogalou and Tsianos (2015) can be equated to the working crew’s own solidarities performed in the video content. Working crew’s digitalities

challenge the state and development agencies supremacy over images of what bordering and ‘irregular migration’ entails (Heller, 2014; Musarò, 2019). Everyday video posts of self-made, hand-held scratchy videos of life and work at the borderlands were documented by the crew members, guides and sometimes the passengers themselves. The videos ranged in style and theme. Videos narrated different messages; some explicitly for smuggling services, and others indicated repertoires of online youth gang performances (for a systematic review on gangs and social media see. Fernández-Planells et al., 2021).

I started to ‘follow’ the accounts under a user pseudonym, as I tapped and swiped the algorithm snowballed. Quite quickly I was watching mobility being performed from the point of crossing with the assistance of the working crew; ‘passengers’ filmed walking through woodlands near Croatia; surveilling transit hubs (stations and ports, police interceptions) and references made to movement (railway lines) (see book titled ‘Via-Politics’, edited by Waters, Heller and Pezzani, 2022). In other videos, individuals showing group affiliation to a particular working crew were documenting and archiving a diverse repertoire of videos revealing ‘everyday life’ along the Balkan route, openly broadcasting their interactions with the materiality of borders almost in real-time.

Over multiple months of field work and after conducting multiple interviews, I started to find out people on the move (passengers) were ‘tapped’ into these online platforms to plan their own itineraries. It was not only TikTok they managed to find crew content, many used Facebook sites that openly posted information and links to smuggler channels on other instant messaging services.

All the accounts were public and did not require consent to enter, as they were naturally occurring in the digital ecosystem, similar to the physical world discussions and practices that played out in front of myself and activists everyday in the borderland (Holt, 2020). Some of the crews would post live events on their TikTok channels. They would show their

lives, in various spatialities they were active—routes and borders in which they controlled. Crews would also regularly make new ‘burner accounts’, that were clearly from the same user. Some of the Individuals were more prominent with posting than their fellow crew members.

From the perspective of the activists, and myself included, I used the accounts to track where the next routes were forming during a period when the route was undergoing a transition phase after the October 27th 2023 operation. The working crews would leave all kinds of clues as to where they were setting up their routes: transit camps; transportation hubs; landmarks; nondescript woodland scenes next to the border accompanied with the flags of each country the border divided; and some of the squatted buildings I would frequent during fieldwork.

Types of content produced by the individual workers and crew affiliated accounts varied from monitoring police operations, usually in the form of internal pushbacks within Serbia. Other video material were clearly advertising services, whilst others developed a subterranean script of in-group solidarity, and group conflict with rival crews. On the rare occasion one of the crews involved in banditry practices posted videos of hostage taking.

I took a passive approach to the online communities, but asked questions during interviews and during informal conversations with activists, border workers and migrants that had either passively or actively engaged with digital content and/or in the digital space. As Lambrechts (2025, p.105) argues, social actors transfer ‘their physical footprint into the digital realm’ — at some point nearly all these actors had a part to play in the visual re-making of borders in the digital sphere (passive or active), in what Triandafyllidou and Massari (2025) argue as ‘visual governance’ of borders and routes from below.

Inter-group (Border) Violence: Conflict and Solidarity

As I have previously covered, long term activists and journalists following the events in the northern borders remember the violence escalating from 2022. Anna the long term activist and NGO worker, remembers the introduction of weapons started from the 2nd of July. This was also the date Serbian journalist, Sasa Dragjolo, remembers as the moment the escalation of violence started with armed weapons. The Minister of the interior (MUP), at the time (2020-2022), Aleksander Vulin, was reported in the Serbian national newspaper, Telegraf with combative words in response to the July 2nd shooting:

"Every human being who finds themselves in our territory has rights that we respect without question, they have the right to dignity, but no armed smuggling gang will pass through Serbia without being found, broken up and punished"

By the time I entered the field ten months later, there were two group's being reported in investigative media reports from Dragjolo. The conflict was not only being published in the local and national newspapers on a weekly basis, it was the crews themselves that communicated adversarial relations. The two groups in question went by the name of '313' and '40059' on TikTok. But they were not the only crews that had stylised themselves on the traditional youth, street gang aesthetic (Kelley, 1996), crews made up of Moroccan, Algerian and Tunisian nationals⁷², were using the infamous gangster names of Kazawi⁷³,

⁷² ended in a gun fight in the town of Horgoš. The crews quickly disbanded after this event in November 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/serbian-police-find-600-migrants-after-shootout-near-hungarian-border-2022-11-25/>

⁷³ ⁷³ <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/09/04/albanian-supplied-aks-fuel-violence-on-refugee-route-through-serbia/>

Kazawi appreciation rap video by artist Tati: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6x2dZsk8dE>

and Tataouin⁷⁴. All of these groups occupied separate pieces of abandoned farmland or brown field sites dotted within close proximity to the Hungarian fence. Sometimes one crew's 'territory' was encroached upon by a rival. With the political economy of bordering concentrated into such a small geography the crews entered a spatial conflict which was communicated via working crew accounts on TikTok. A recent study following south African gangs self-promotion, Lambrechts (2025) finds content shot on TikTok is simply an extension of their lived reality on the streets, through the gangs community interaction, performing violence, notions of crime, and gang cultures.

In Serbia the government played a double game, taking money from the EU's externalisation budgets whilst encouraging working crews to take control of mobility 'management' as a client of the Serbian state authorities⁷⁵, under the name of Major Deki. But by 2023, the situation became untenable as violence between the crews ensued sparking a public relations issue for the Serbian state, as local grievances started to ramp up. The village of Hajdukovo set up a citizens assembly with the head of police chief answering questions to a concerned village hall. The local newspaper SuboticaOnline headlined with:

"Citizens of Hajdukov: Migrant crisis or terrorism? Police: We act every day and plan how to protect citizens!"

The working crews were embroiled in violent and often armed skirmishes that turned working crew labour from facilitating passage of migrants to the fence to then having to

⁷⁴ see migrants from Tataouin
<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/03/leveraging-lives-serbia-and-illegal-tunisian-migration-to-europe?lang=en>

⁷⁵ Major Deki police commander involved with Syrian network:
<https://balkaninsight.com/2022/06/22/with-police-connections-serbian-syrian-translator-turned-people-smuggler/>

defend the passages they had created from rivals. Spatially the borderland was divided between the crews and communicated via TikTok sending messages directly to the other crews in warning and threat videos. In 40059 video (see below) explicitly performs a conflict relation with the other crews. The number of 313 in the middle with a cross sign through the numbers, and a green tick signalling allegiance to 40059. What was communicated online would filter into the conversations I had with interviewees; activists, migrants that were active in the borderland at the time and into the media.



— Left side screenshot communicates the other crew numbers 40059 showing hostility

— Right side Screenshot is reference to where they are located next to Orban's fence, colloquially named 'Tawar' with image of 'watchtower'⁷⁶ in the background.

⁷⁶ Watchtower was the location given by activists, also known as 'Tawar' by 40059

During my conversation with Aryan (AR), he paints an intimate story of the young men whom were crew members. According to him they are both from the same region in Afghanistan and many of the core members knew each other because they grew up together in the same villages that had been effected by consecutive wars since the 1980s (see. Zilberg, 2011 on transnational migrant gangs, and US deportation system as a product of American cultural and military imperialism in the western hemisphere). It was not clear from AR's recollection exactly when and how the groups started to form, but he does mention the first 'boss' that started smuggling people across this section of border:

"He was a good guy, he kept everything calm and in control, there was no fighting, the boys working with him were in control of their actions. What I later saw, bro...It upset me... because they're boys that I know since they were like babies. They all started to take drugs, brother, they were out of control...The original boss man, he's in prison now, in Serbia. After he went to prison, the young boys lost it, so they (young boys) started with the weapons and then the drugs. It all started then, bro..."

When I ask AR about the TikTok videos he dismisses the videos as 'just kids use this, bro.' But when I ask him a follow up question about the numbers in the videos, he tells me, originally 313 was the number of the smuggler that was now languishing in a Serbian gaol. After the man's prison sentence, 40059 started their own splinter crew and this was when the 'conflict' started. He narrates how too many young boys lost their lives because of the two 'warring' crews and how it was causing issues back home in Afghanistan:

"One of the young boys from 40059 was murdered, bro, gunned down when the police action started [October 2023]... he ran away from the police and towards 313 where he was shot...His family still don't know where his body is, brother. The other [crew] will not admit they killed the boy, because of the shame, and potential problems it may cause for families back in Afghanistan. But it is hurting the family to not see their son"

In a tiny area that hugged the Hungarian fence, the two groups engaged in what seemed at the time to be daily gun battles that made it into the local Subotica Online news on multiple occasions⁷⁷. With only their nationality, alleged crime and date of birth reported from police press releases:

‘Subotica police announced that they managed to arrest the Afghan citizen A.N. (1996) on suspicion of having committed the crimes of aggravated murder and aggravated attempted murder. A.N. yesterday morning, took part in a conflict between two groups of migrants in a forest area near the Hungarian border near Subotica, in which six people were injured, while one person died - according to the press release of the Subotica Police Department.’

For what lacked in detail in the police’s press releases and the media’s regurgitated reporting was told via TikTok channels. Me and other activists that got to know some of the young men through our regular visits to the borderlands would also start to put faces and names to the videos of the men featured in the crew’s TikTok. The accounts were useful to stay informed as to the compositions of the crews, as one activist explains:

“I always found it quite interesting and helpful to understand them a bit more and through TikTok. I understood the dynamics a bit more when I would like meet the groups. Like I haven't been able to do that for all groups, but especially for like 1 squat where it really like helped me a lot, through TikTok, You see all these people that have been friends for five years, you really understand that dynamic better.

When there was a death or a suspected murder at the border, crew profiles communicated their losses via online memorials (see. Patton et al., 2018 Gangs on Twitter; Aguilar et al., 2024 digital grieving practices of gang-affiliated black youth). One of the long term

⁷⁷ <https://www.subotica.com/tag/migranti>

All the reports of shootings in this period can be found here. The local paper dedicated a whole section named ‘migranti’. Here we see the media reporting on ‘migrants’ as crime.

activists relays the commemoration during an interview 6 months after she left northern Serbia:

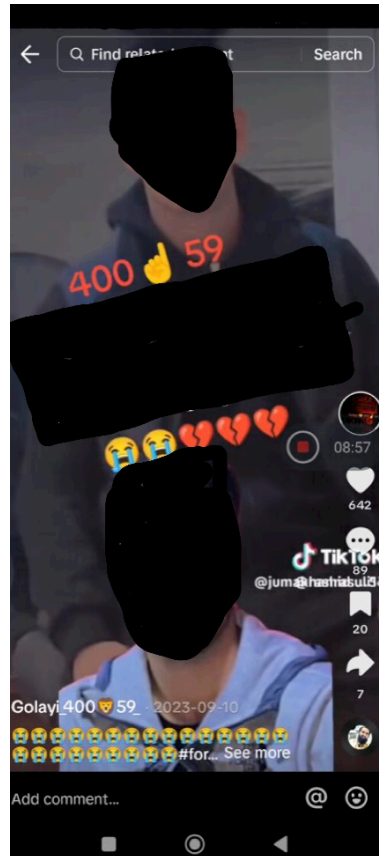
There's like information sharing also regarding when people die. like for example when there was the incident with Karim. There was like the video was shared a lot, still videos like I could like open TikTok today and probably there would still be a video of him and also from like some other people that were killed.

I also perceive it as kind of informational sharing there because the accounts that have a huge following really want to inform people back home...it's about kind of honouring them and remembering them. And for me, [it felt] maybe it's strange to do it on social media at first

One of the other activists remembers on the messaging board the words written in Farsi and English, “martyr”:

"Martyr was the kind of word we knew meant someone died at the border. It's like Allah loves or like returns martyrs, martyrs. That was usually a sign that someone had died"

One of the young men that was murdered in the August of 2023, was someone all the activists got to know when out on ‘distro’. He was also a friend of the family of AR. His death was publicised on the TikTok memorials. At the time the activists were told we had been hit by train, because his body was found next to a train track. I later hear from AR and one of the activists handling the body to be repatriated to loved ones that he had been visibly been killed. The motive behind his death was never uncovered nor the perpetrator.



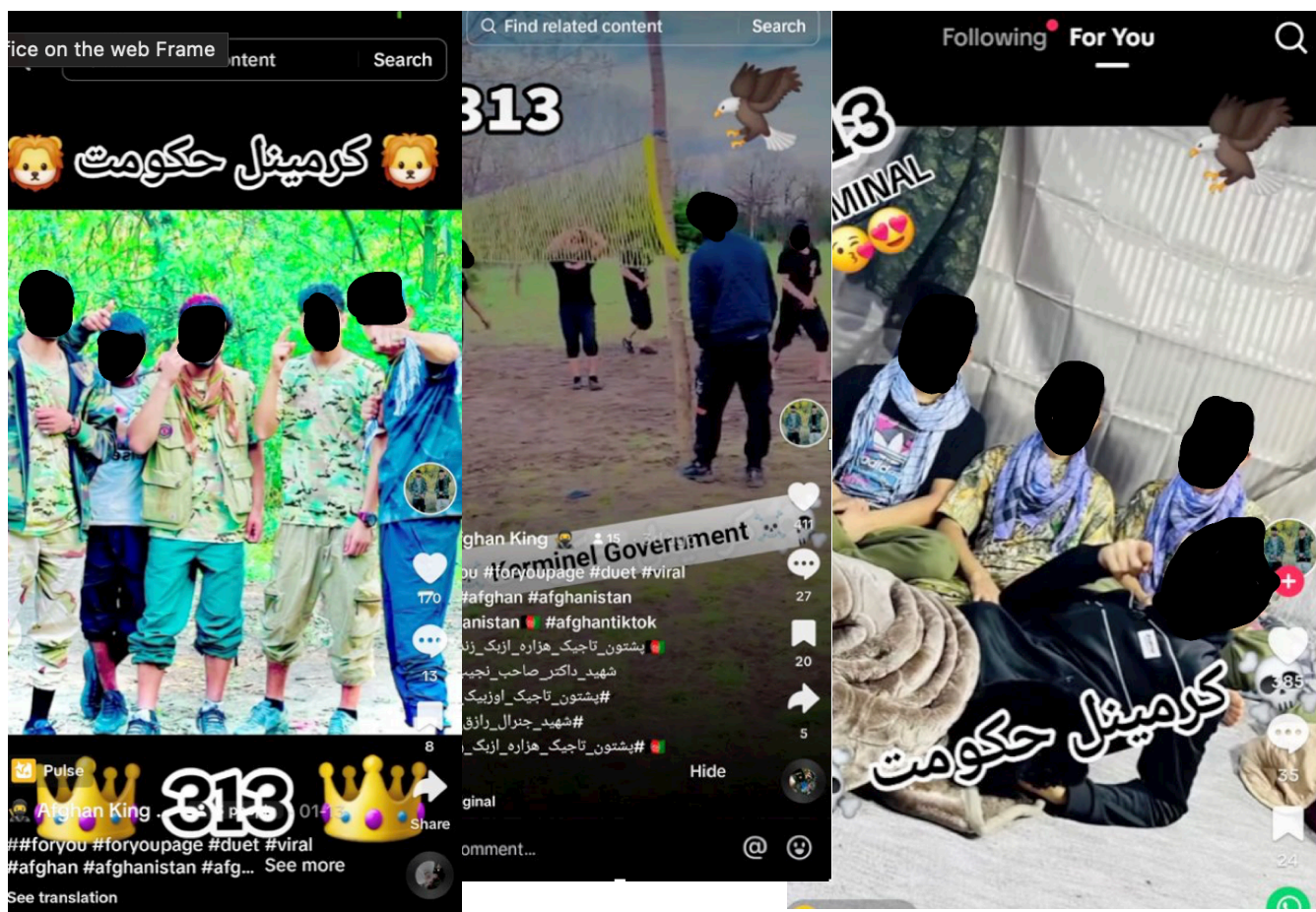
TikTok Memorial of a 40059 member shot in Subotica Lidl car park on the 1st September 2023

Despite the emotional tones of memorialisation of a young man's death, rival crew members seized on the murders as an opportunity to communicate their adversarial relationship and even claims to the murder from one of the crew's own TikTok account (see. Lauger and Densley, 2018 for performing 'badness' online). Sociologists have written extensively about marginalised youth, here we find 'street capital' in the context of border externalisation, youth culture projecting 'badness', and street wise masculinity, socially constructs the body into being emotionally tough, in ways that can be translated along routes and borders (Sandberg and Pedersen, 2022, adapted from the Bourdieu social capital).

One of the activist saw that the death of one crew members was used by the other to taunt via TikTok communications. She (activist) so happened to be on the scene of a working crew feud that happened in broad daylight in the town of Subotica on the 1st September 2023. She remembers seeing later on TikTok accounts confirmation that it was a crew related murder:

after the shooting at Lidl, there was, one of the gangs that put a video of them outside Lidl, after the man had died...with their, number all over it. I don't know, maybe thinking too much into it, but I would presume that that's, like, the two have got to be correlated.

With what seemed to be the intensification of inter-group violence during fieldwork, TikTok videos revealed in-group camaraderie. The crews excessively posted videos depicting intra-communal life at the borders, creating the foundations of a resistance identity developed through the crew an internal sense of togetherness (Conquergood, 1994; Castells, 2000). For instance, many videos from the two crews (313 and 40059) would show a collage or range of still images (photos) of group photos and others showing the group's living in the encampment where they were set up close to the fence. A typical video would pan from one individual to the next — mostly with a group of 4-8 crew members. The video narrates individuality of each member, but all collectively under the allegiance to the crew number. Furthermore, it seemed an intimate show of their social life at the borders. Not so much a promo video for smuggling capability, rather a show of life at the border, documenting their leisure time and strength of being as one in a strange and violent environment.



X3 screenshots from a 313 profile showing 'leisure' time and a uniform aesthetic of life where they worked and lived at the border encampments

This also spoke to the crew's social reproductive role in an incredibly violent existence whether that was state or crew violence. The frontline workers of 313 and 40059 did not curate a glamorous life at the border, videos show 'survival' in woodlands, living under make-shift tarpaulin, shots round the camp fire and even make-shift volley ball court to keep active. Many videos narrated 'normality', similar to the rap video but without the professional skills of a video producer and explicit references to gangsterism, but still feeding into the aesthetic of the working crew life and labour.

With spatial isolation due to government policy and police bribery and corruption, access outside of camps and borderland areas are restricted and dangerous if one did not want to be thrown into a police cell overnight. Thus, crews were confined to these spaces, thus solidifying their social worlds to the encampment or the farmer's fields and woodlands next to the fence. Some of the videos would make reference to the locations in which their encampments were situated geographically. For instance, the working crew's geography was at times deliberately made visible, one of the crew's named their area 'Towar', a place where they worked and lived (Volleyball photo), known to locals as 'Markovica' forest, and to activists and NGOs as 'watchtower'. De Certeau (1984, p.93) when writing about the city, emphasises representations are related to the daily life of fragments and alternative spaces the cartesian map does not capture. Thus the working crew through social media accounts not only document their experiences at the border, they re-map the borderlands in their own visual imaginary.

The EU's unforeseen policy to externalise border controls to Serbian crews and local police culminates into a series of bloody episodes for the young men caught up in smuggling labour. Not only was smuggling in the north about moving people across the territory, it was also securing that territory from any rivals that may have the idea of taking over the area (see above in the introduction to this thesis in the story of Sami). This was a reality that mirrored videos that narrated a hostile feud between the two main crews at the time. It was a way to communicate further their territory and the in group solidarities that they formed through those spaces.

For the activists it was a way of informing themselves on the discourses that were happening behind the surface facing individuals that were involved in the violence. Online memorials were especially useful to learn who had passed and who lay claim to one's

murder. In addition, the TikTok accounts conveyed the human loss of mobile youth, rather than the type casting of initials, followed by the age and nationality, their identities was enough to make them guilty. The media regurgitated the police's press releases verbatim, reporting in a shorthand style that reinforces the notion of migrants as synonymous with a pathology for violence, rather than as an unforeseen outcome of state bordering. Lastly not only does this effect the lives of the young men involved in smuggling, it is a huge burden on border towns (its inhabitants) that become the epicentres of global migration 'management'

Material critique of Borders

This form of communication generated a substantial volume of content drawn directly from the physical labour of working crew members at the borders. When it comes to the Crew's own visual representation of their 'handy work'— their collective labour power, Kesharvez (2024) offers a recent intervention that empirically uncovers the material practices of smugglers as a critical intervention to state bordering. He argues (ibid, P.3), 'smugglers recognise borders as configurations made out of materials that can be reconfigured for other purposes than they are conceived.' What the videos depict are the working crew's own immanent material practices that rework the border materiality into their own image.

This category of communication produces images of the 'workers' re-arranging the border material. In general, the context of these clips features border hardware, border personnel (border guards), and the smuggler's relation to them. Most of the videos show border fences and walls, barbed wire, watch towers, sometimes drones, and border gates. In others, border police feature at the centre of the video, they tend to be shown guarding and chasing working crews, sometimes interacting with the members through verbal exchanges

and hand gestures. In all the clips the creator in the video is with his crew, and their actions are instrumental in the messaging of the clip. Thus, their physical presence and active engagement at the border fence is documented and posted into their digital space. The viewer is immersed in the working crew's socialities, by documenting (online) their interaction with the materials that have come to symbolise deterrents, are 'reconfigured' through direct (inter)-action.



'Dancing border guards' X2 screenshots taken from by 313 crew

In an era where the proliferation of physical deterrents — border walls and fences are symbolic and instrumental to the state's ontological security and imagined national sovereignty, crews have taken the decision to include them in their video content. The materials of borders and personnel are exposed and devalued, mocked and teased,

deconstructed and objectified when the working crew captures interactions with state border authorities and their respective materials (police cars, jeeps, military clothing, weapons, safety gear etc...). For instance, this clip (see above) uploaded by 313 was one of many videos regularly posting their engagement with the Hungarian fence and the men guarding it. The men in the video are seen dancing with border guards that seem to be waving their truncheons and shields in response to the dancing crew. These engagements depict a light hearted intervention with the border guards being de-robed from their perceived importance as defenders of the border. Everyday young men engaged with the fence and its personnel, encountering guards, usually after being caught taking groups across the borderlands on the Hungarian side to then be pushed back into Serbia. The images of spectacular movement across the fence was used as advertisements in the video, while also the borderlands are visualised by the crew with youthful undertones of play and mockery. This is well summarised during an interview with one of the activists that knew some of the workers:

"If you think it's a great advertisement (TikTok), right? Like you see the boys [Working Crew], most of their advertisements were them cutting the fences and their TikToks... sitting on the fences and like beating up cameras or there would be lots of them, like throwing rocks and stuff at the border, like in between [the two border fences]. I mean there's so much video of the fence, because I think that's what people think of when they think of crossing a border"

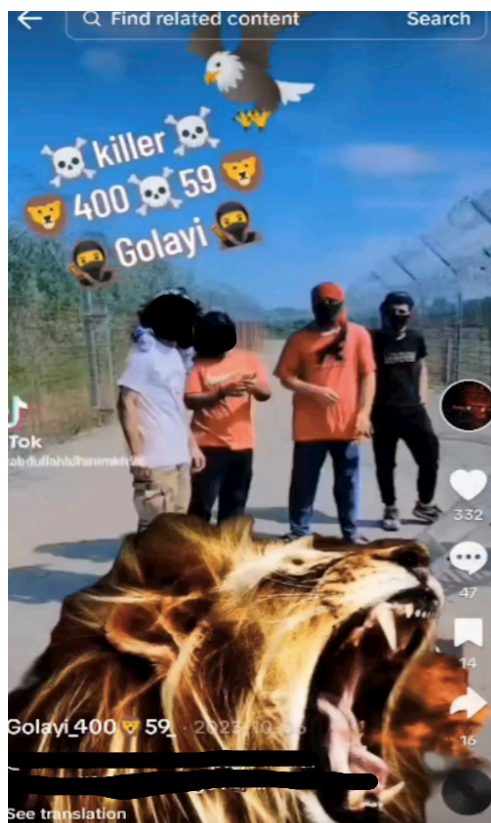
In 2015 the fence was built by Viktor Orbán's government as a reaction to the 'summer of migration'. Following from the original first construction, Orbán decided to build a second line of fence in August 2016, and construction was officially announced to have commenced in 27th February 2017, with the intention of keeping out unwanted mobility. By 2023, Viktor Orbán is cited explaining to parliament, "the defence is certainly not 100

percent, but its successful”⁷⁸ after criticisms were made during the uptick in unofficial bordering crossings in 2022-2023.

Many videos did not feature the moving of ‘passengers’ in the working crew’s videos. For instance one of the rival crews to 313, crew number 40059, filmed themselves in the section where the border guard’s road snaked in between Hungarian and Serbian territory. This was not the only clip showing the relaxed demeanour of the crew, expressing their ability to breach the fence, but also to pose in front of the cameras and spend time inside the liminal space in between the two fences separating Hungary and Serbia. Clips posted in the fence show the crew members walking slowly towards the camera, producing hand signals, with their insignia (number) and apex predator emojis. The use of the TikTok application was used to relatively artistic effects into a blend of collage which only reinforced the crew’s collective identity. Some of the faces of the members were covered whilst others chose not to cover, thus subverting the securitarian character of these supposedly fortified spaces.

Border lines are usually the places where identification is an obligation, where the border official checks the border crosser. Rather the working crew cross this borderline without care, unchecked and unmasked. The frontline ‘workers’ operating at the border pride themselves on taunting border personnel. The looming sense of danger and seriousness of state borders and their respective border materials are neutralised through the group’s display of collective labour power exaggerated for communicative effect. They are rather material practices embedded in their own everyday material and legal condition (illegalised and racialised people) and subverted to their audiences (Brotherton, 2015).

⁷⁸ Orban quote reported in the Balkan Insight (Published 29-2-2024): <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/02/29/hungary-mixed-feelings-on-both-sides/>



Members of 40059 posing in the section in between Hungarian and Serbian border used by the Hungarian border police to patrol. The border fence was erected by the ethno-nationalist Orban government in 2015 and 2016, later becoming the centre piece of the crews videos and everyday border crossing encounters

The attitude comes with a sense of confidence and mockery at the border regime's expenditure in technology. Other Video content emphasised movement, with individual border workers approaching the fence at ease with the police always chasing after them. The video is shot in a cinematic wide lens style, as opposed to most which are handheld videos. The first shot is of a Hungarian police vehicle speeding across the road in between the two fences. The young border worker is completely at ease with the sense of urgency on the part of the border police. Next shot is of the border worker walking closer to the fence with the wide lens capturing the border landscape. While one of his fellow crew members joins him, they walk towards the Hungarian border police in tandem. The impression gives ability to approach even though the border police are in a hurry to protect. Moreover, the fence itself becomes part of the crew's identity. One of the Syrian working member's profile, decides to use a group photo of about 20 young men posing in front of a barbed wired fence for a group photo, some with hand signs, others with covered faces. The image

gives the impression that this is their territory and the fence is incorporated into their material assemblage.

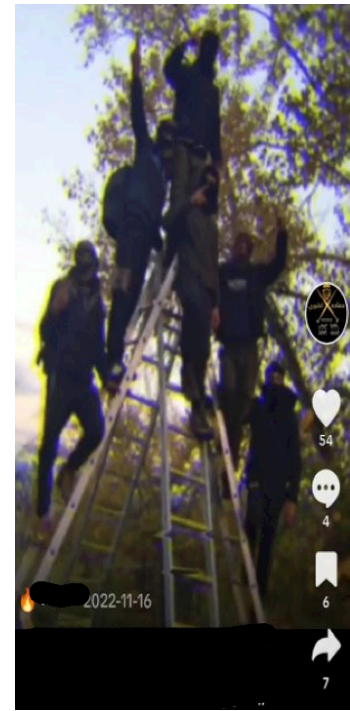
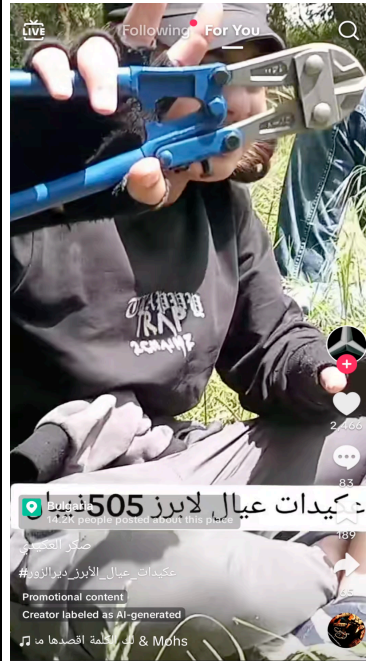


X2 screenshots from one of 313 Crew member videos approaching the fence with ease as an oncoming border police patrol car comes driving down the road where 40059 posed in the previous image (see above)

Most videos it was the scale and danger of penetrating border fences and evading detection that was most clearly narrated as opposed to the nonchalant attitude in the 313 videos (above). Sense of danger and being on the run — enthruses a sense of fugitive life, there is always an element of danger — nearly being caught by police, and hinting at the border worker's special ability to go undetected. Other videos produced a voyeurist camera angle, as if you are the one filming (or watching). The camera person would be recording the state's surveillance systems and hardware, flipping the power dynamic of state surveillance, now being surveilled by the crews — surveilling surveillance. While it seems counter-intuitive to film borders as heavily surveilled systems, documenting one's ability to

come up close to the ‘danger’ and reaffirms the adversarial relation between border workers and state authority. Secondly it reaffirms the risks involved and the impossibility for one to attempt to scale alone, or without the workers ‘expertise’.

Video productions show moments when there was a sense of danger, urgency and fast paced action packed border crossing with passengers in the custody of crews, sometimes content verged on ambiguity and indifference to state border enforcers, with crew members taking it one step further by showing videos of border police arresting them at the end of a police chase. Not only are the materials and personnel of state bordering included into the visual repertoire of working crews, they also include materials of their own. As kesharavez (2024) states in his paper on the material critique of borders, smugglers do not only include the movement of human beings — they rely on their own materials as instruments to facilitate mobility. These instruments are brought into the videos to show their technical capacities, which ‘actively determines the scale, speed, place, and time of smuggling.’ (Ibid, p.16). Working crew members narrate their ability to temporarily re-articulate the visual representation of the border as impenetrable by. The introduction of their own tools into the visual composition serves two purposes: first, by showing their labour power as capable of penetrating border materiality. Second, the materials used by the crews to breach the fences, such as ladders and bolt cutters, become symbolic instruments of the crews material practice and identity (also selected in the Lady Miro video introduced near the top of this chapter).



X2 Profile pictures from Working Crew accounts and x2 video screenshots of the working crew's tools and tools at work. The screenshot of the picture below is not the Balkan border.

One of these symbols that became the profile pictures of many crew accounts were the ladders. In the north of Serbia ladders were introduced as a simple payment scale for the crews to charge different rates⁷⁹ to cross over the fence and a symbolic of part of the crew's

⁷⁹ one ladder costs was cheaper than two, another added cost would be to cross with the ladders at known points along the fence where the guides knew the border guards were looking the other way

labour power, to the extent the Serbian Ministry of Interior featured the ladders in their own 'crime fighting' YouTube channel clearly sending a message to an end to the crews exploits. One of the uploads shows two armed gendarmerie personnel, standing over the seized ladders during the major operation in late October 2023.



Video Taken from the Ministry of Interior (MUP) website. This was the night after the counter-smuggling operation on the 27th October 2023 somewhere near Horgos and Palic

These utilitarian objects necessary for smuggling people across the barriers are symbolic instruments that materially cuts through and crosses over the symbols of European sovereign power. The crews celebrated and posed with their tools; faces uncovered, running with ladders placed under their arms on the way for an evening of border fence breaching. Crews smile and wave to the camera. Some of the crew profile videos and profile pictures show members holding up bolt cutters in front of their faces, whilst others are simply placed on profile pictures as emblems.

Smugglers are visual communicators of border interventions. Their collective and individual clips of everyday labour power is projected to public accounts. Rather than a deterrent, border materials become active parts in the smuggler's visual performance. Moreover, crews introduce the tools of their 'trade' that have instrumental as well as symbolic function as an identity formed from their labour. These spectacle TikTok clips play into the sensitivity of the invasive foreigner, and mocks Viktor Orban's ethno-nationalist politics. These materials of European sovereign power form part of a continuation of European colonialism (De Genova, 2013) — fences and border technology. They have become essential visual and instrumental symbols in the state's ontological security for ethno-national identity politics and projects. For racial capital to extract ever greater surplus, a communications struggle is emerging between state narratives and crews' own visual re-articulations of what bordering looks and feels, conveyed through raw, personalised footage. This terrain becomes a communicative battleground where the 'securitisation industry' will find near impossible to counter the powerful appeal of distinctly youthful sensibility — that is mobility and forbidden 'dangers'.

Branding, Identity and Myths

In this next section I will zoom out and link the trans-local entanglements bordering produces through the stories, myths and branding to first entice people to cross borders, while also developing a resistance identity for border workers. Thus, both branding and identity is played with by the working crews, based on their own histories and story telling. The branding and identity work that is broadcasted to TikTok videos and Facebook posts are blended with a mixture of mythological storytelling that distorts the realities of moving across land routes.

Not only isolated to the depths of working crew digitalities, in the north of Serbia, the Serbian and Hungarian state used the mythology for their own crime fighting narratives and racialised tropes of the crew's back story and histories. The theorists in cultural criminology (Ferrell, Hayward, and Young, 2008. p.48, adapted from Baudillard's 'hyper-reality thesis'), argue media 'loops and spirals by which a moral panic emerges as a collective endeavour in which the youth, the media, the moral entrepreneurs, the control agents, and the public are all accomplices in the action.' The state re-invigorates orientalist notions of the dangerous muslim and the 'Afghan warrior' pathology that seemed to have followed the mythology of working crews from Afghanistan within narratives of people on the move and in the media and state-run YouTube channels (Patel, 2017). Thus the border and routes become an entanglement of communications based on historical and contemporary characterisations which are then turned into subjective experiences for people on the move, border workers and the publics alike. Moctar (2023, p.64) proposes border regimes are 'entangled within a broader social and economic structures, and this entanglement conditions the nature and scope of subjective desires and needs'. No more so are the communicators 'from below', drawing new subjectivities at the borders from history and deep seated prejudices and stigmatised subjectivities exaggerated in the media and on th working crew's own digitalities (Mezzarda, 2011).

I am in the hotel restaurant in Bihać scrolling through a Facebook page that an ex-guide from Morocco was previously posting videos for his smuggling services. The posting of tips and tricks, places to stay en-route, prices, and videos showing the passenger's appreciation(s) for the smuggler's efficient and effective service. One interviewee from Morocco explains:

'you have to do like dedication video. Everyone do that. [for] the smuggler.'

[impersonates the people in the video]

“Oh, hello. this is the date. We are reaching [name of location]” this video is taken by the smuggler. It's like. They push you [to take the video].’

The names of smugglers started with the infamous ‘mafia’ boss that goes under the name of ‘Kazawi’, which is a reference to Casablanca, Morocco. The European border regime produces transnational mythology around ‘mafia caricatures as key to your destination. They become a branding exercise for the smuggling crews to name themselves. For Battaieb (2022) the youth of Tataouin admire Kazawi not only because they deliver you to your chosen destination but because he symbolises the story of ‘making it’, a rags to riches story line, a powerful figure that is helping his own people. The smuggler's story of entrepreneurial spirit, encourages individual story lines of strength and determination. This was embodied in the powerful images of ‘the guide’ which featured heavily in the videos from Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco smuggler promo videos

For some of the Moroccan youth I met in the winter of ’23-24 in Bihać town, many claimed to have previously been the guide at one stage of their journey. It was something that featured in the videos, as an aesthetic they would document, leading a group of 4-8 barely adult men. Many of those deciding to do guide work, did so out of necessity — they did not have the resources to complete the whole trip with a smuggler. Many youths I met, were living and working in Turkey. They would find work in factories for extremely exploitative wages. After three months they would be made officially illegal (undocumented). Being trapped into hopeless exploitative wages in Turkey and the fear of being deported or thrown in gaol for being undocumented many turned to guide ‘work’ — moving small

groups across the Turkey-Bulgaria border. For most whom could not afford to pay the smuggling fees to escape Turkey, this was a one-off to pay for their journey, for others, multiple trips made for financial reward. Almost all the young men I met in Bosnia, going back to Morocco or Algeria was not an option, despite all the dangers of living and working in between the formal and illicit economies.

The videos made by mostly Moroccan guides tended to follow the same formula. Typically videos start with preparation in Turkey before setting out to go on ‘the game’ to Italy. The video then clips to a moment with the group walking through woodland and other difficult terrains (during ‘the game’), to eventually end with a picture at the Duomo in Milano. The Duomo has become an iconic symbol for Moroccans travelling to Europe. Famous rap artists⁸⁰ that reside and born in Italy with Arab heritage have made the city a dream for young Moroccans to visit as they identify with the diaspora in which the rappers come from. With TikTok videos depicting multiple video ‘stories’ of young men with only their backpacks and clothes on their backs smiling and waving at the camera as they traverse under the cover of woodlands, the caption in the video, selected by the young, Moroccan guide, includes a dose of romanticism and realism in the story for his compatriots:

“most of the immigrants who left their homelands had dreams. There were those who arrived and achieved them. There are those who got lost in the streets of Europe. There were those who failed and turned back. There were those who died at sea. And there were those who died on the way to Greece. And the Balkan countries... and there are those who are languishing in prisons...and there are those who are still struggling and defying difficulties in order to reach their goal...[FOLLOWED BY 12 European Country flags]... There is no one who can overcome alienation except god”

⁸⁰ Baby Gang is the most famous and others with Moroccan heritage have been influential

When I questioned Moroccan and Algerian youths that I knew had engaged in smuggler facilitation services, Reda (Moroccan) protests the videos do not depict the reality when he reflects on his time moving across with one of the guides:

And you know, if you would like get to cross Bulgaria and the car could pick you up, I've seen it. I've seen it. So, it doesn't matter how traumatic or bad. It's always like happy, happy. Yeah. For him, it's like publicity.

When I interview the men stuck in Bihać, I ask the Moroccan youths for their on reflections of the 'guide videos'. The name Kazawi kept coming up in their responses to the video material they had personally engaged with as part of their planning itineraries across the Balkan route⁸¹:

Tarek: There is a lot of [mobile] numbers, a lot of videos saying this is like Kazawi, This is the guy. One of the famous guys like taking Morocco is called Kazawi. That's famous from Kazawi.

Lawrence: Who is that [Kazawi]?

Tarek: He's like the best smuggler. If you ask any Moroccan and say Kazawi, he will know him.

Lawrence: He's like a famous smuggler?

⁸¹ in 2023-24 esp. Turkey-Bulgaria-Serbia section after the EU's pressure to close down liberal Visa measures between Serbia and the north African countries

Tarek: Yeah. He had big influence. More than Syrian guy[s] [Syrian crews]. Because he was like having a gangsters working with him in the border of Serbia, Hungary.

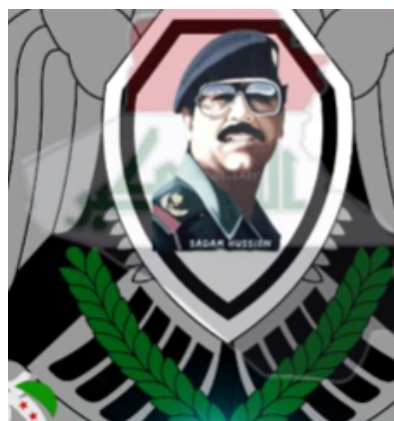
Kazawai was referred to by migrants as the figure of a ‘gangster’ or head of the ‘mafia’ in the smuggling crews. Despite the positive storylines of the good smuggler in the videos and the positive mythology surrounding gangster figures for young people (Battaieb, 2022), respondents saw the promotion videos as deceptive, as moving under the custody of the guide in this part of the route was often thwart with many obstacles the videos do not reflect. The violence of state bordering, and the anxiety and stress this puts the guide and his group under has been narrated by guides and passengers are not promoted on social media accounts of ‘making it’ with Kazawi or another [insert name] of smuggler.

For other country networks other forms of branding took shape in the form of numbers with links to places of origin in which political, social and cultural subjectivity is blended into the videos. When it came to the Syrian crew(s), they incorporated the number 515 and 505 into their video content. It would either feature prominently in the main body of the video, the TikTok profile name, and photos or feature subtly in the hashtag and descriptions section. Profiles of the crews would promote their services with references to places of origin⁸². This was confirmed by Abdel, a Syrian migrant that had made it across the route in 2023. I was given his contact by an activist that got to know him well during his time in Serbia. When I asked him via instant message the significance of the numbers

⁸² one of the syrian crews heavily referenced Free Syrian Army logos. In others, prominent tribal leaders that were fighting in the Deir-ez-zor region. Moreover the 515 number became a strong symbol of pride for Syrian diaspora living in Germany, with TikTok videos with 515 or 505 laminated on the back window of their cars. Turkish media also picked up on the number as a sign of Arab nationalism, referencing the 515 number as part of a gang reviving Hashemite Arab nationalism from the 1920s.

of the Syrian crews (505 and 515), he tells me ‘I think that 505 must mean Busarayas Clan or family, 515 Bakararas...big families they have many members’ from the Deirezzor region⁸³.

Along with links to ‘powerful families’ back home, most videos featured national flags and regions indicating where the crew were from, with apex predator animals, and ‘criminal’ references all indicated power and prestige. Examples include, ‘Afghan King’, ‘kriminal’, with slogans of ‘we know who we are and fear no one’. References to power and politics from a not so distant past were a large feature in the videos and profile pictures of smugglers; with crowns, Saladin crest indicating Arab nationalism, and even the head bust of Saddam Hussein in the middle of the profile picture with the name of the smuggler, contact details and a slogan, “who is the Iraqi father?” Other political-military leaders from Deir-el-zor made the profile pictures of crews from this part of Syria. I would find the numbers of the Syrian and Afghan working crews graffiti sprayed or scratched into the walls of smuggler-run squatted buildings along the route (see photo) during field visits to the borderlands.



Screen shots examples of Working Crew advertisements / profile pictures

⁸³ Family names are influential on the ‘Deir Ez-Zor military council’
See. <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/monde/syrie-les-affrontements-se-poursuivent-entre-le-pkk-ypg-et-les-arabes-à-deir-ez-zor/2978744>

see Dukhan (2019; 2024) for a historic-sociological perspective on state failure, sectarianism, and tribal governance in Deir-el-zor



Squat Photos of crew numbers within 1km of Orban's fence (photos by L. Jabs, taken Spring 2024)

Not only were these promotion videos and profiles for services, the young guys seized the opportunity to develop their own aesthetic through the status that comes with being a crew member and this was exaggerated on the TikTok platforms. Many of the young guys we met in the borderlands would use TikTok to show which crew they were working with. Their profiles incorporated references to mobility, especially videos captured along train tracks, and transport hubs (stations) featured heavily. Others would shoot videos of themselves posing outside transit camps showing where they are based along the route, accompanied with flags of the countries they operated within.

For younger members of working crew the image of being in a crew gave them status and an identity at the borders. This was then then performed by channelling non-verbal codes and opaque intra-communications both when we turned up to distributions, or on their mobile phones (gang signs, body language performed online) (Conquergood, 1994). Crew members had a certain style and swagger about them. You can spot them out from a large group of people in the bordered spaces we entered. The way they hold their posture, gesticulate, and exuding confidence. It would become even more apparent with the natural wariness from the people on the move, knowing that these guys held power along the route. Even down to the clothing of the groups signified a certain look that came with being in the working crew. For the men (and boys) from Afghanistan, they had a certain look; they mixed sportswear with camo prints and sometimes a bandanna (see above images in previous sections). The sports pants were nearly always rolled up above the ankles, sometimes halfway up the lower leg (depending on the time of year), and a scarf loosely fixed around the neck with Afghanistan colours (green, red and black). Moreover, the haircuts loosely conformed to the thick bob cut, with fringes that just sat above the eyebrow. These are all visual cues that are exaggerated through conformity in TikTok performances, showing crew affiliation and are very much tangible parts of cultural and social life at the borders. For the crews from Afghanistan that had gathered attention in the local and national press, their national histories were conflated with their ‘criminal’ identities. What was performed as in-group identity was politicised.

In late January 2024, while traveling with two activists out of Subotica for a day of leisure in Palić, a news report published in the *Balkan Insight* online newspaper⁸⁴, cites an allegedly fake⁸⁵, leaked Hungarian state documents tenuously connecting smuggling crews

⁸⁴ originally published in October 30th 2023

⁸⁵ according to the news article after examination from experts the leaked document is fake. It is not the first time right-wing nativist politics uses ‘fake news’ for political point scoring

in Vojvodina and terrorist organisations in Afghanistan. The “classified document” claimed that the “territory of Vojvodina is under control of the Taliban secret service” and suggested that TikTok videos produced by 40059 and 313 smuggling crews “glorify and demonstrate their martial virtues... [and by doing so] closely resemble the images previously published by the Islamic State and al-Qaeda.” Within the same report, however, these groups were also described as “traffickers,” “Afghan criminal gangs,” and “people smugglers”. While framed through the conventional lens of organised crime, this depiction was further complicated by attention to the crews’ use of the number 313. Between 2021 and 2023, the number gained particular visibility in global media due to its association with the Taliban’s Badri Brigade, which was reported to have played a significant role in the Taliban’s consolidation of power during the United States’ withdrawal from Afghanistan—a connection the report readily invoked.

Narratives in the report characterises the working crew from 313 and 40059 as mindless combatants with a disposition to armed conflict, with a natural tendency for violence linked to their historical and geopolitical origins. Fabled histories of the Pashtuns with warrior mentalities was characterised in the leak, with the working crew’s devotion for the fight of the ‘punjab’, reverting back to the historical record when the Pashtun’s expelled “British, Russians and Americans” by force, alluded to their fighting capability. Mythologizing Afghan border workers into a psychologically traumatised ‘social type’ was further echoed by those crossing the Balkan route. One man from Afghanistan, relayed the mythical status of the Afghan warrior as born from recent past wars,

“in English you say “a man is made by the company which he keeps” because we are born in the war, we grew up in the war, so our psychology is war. Afghani are very brave...they don't scare [sic]. I told you, they are criminal [the border workers].”

Rumour and mythology seemed to have been exported and supplanted into the minds of many I spoke to along the route. With the intensification of smuggling practice and crafted media and state discourse, it was not surprising when I heard either the same stories echoed by migrants, NGO workers and activists parroted as knowledge of the origins of the crews. The politics of neighbouring regions seemed to have hung heavily around the neck of the working crews. Framing organised smugglers from muslim majority parts of the world summoned the ‘men of fighting age’ trope that is regularly utilised for political and cultural capital in Europe (see. Kundnani, 2014). Here we see the branding of the crews get politicised once they were no longer politically expedient to the Serbian-Hungarian bordering regime.

This section shows how branding, myth-making, and identity work to shape the border economy, both from below by working crews and from above by states. Smuggling groups carefully curate names, numbers, and visual symbols—such as Kazawi, 505/515, or 313 and 40059—to craft reputations that both entice migrants and confer prestige. These practices blur the line between entrepreneurial self-promotion and the cultivation of resistance identities, allowing young men to transform precarious survival labour into performances of strength, masculinity, and belonging. Social media platforms, particularly TikTok and Facebook, play a central role for communicating socialities at the borders for the border worker, and intensifies produces this mythological landscape, where narratives of “the guide,” ‘working crew’ attitude, and heroic journeys circulate widely, even as they conceal the violence, trauma, and uncertainty of border crossing.

At the same time, states and media appropriate and distort these same myths, racialising them through orientalist frames of the Afghan warrior and Islamist militancy. Crews such

as 313 and 40059 are recast in leaked documents as Taliban proxies or terrorist extensions, fusing state security discourses with longer colonial tropes of the dangerous Muslim male. This dual production of mythology—by migrants and by states—illustrates how bordering regimes operate as fields of communication where stories, images, and symbols shape a whole host of emotional responses and serve political ends. Smuggling identities become entangled in broader social imaginaries of race, masculinity, and violence, where crews perform their limited power, and states reproduce their bordering cat and mouse function. In this sense, branding at the borders is not mere spectacle but part of the material structuring of mobility, labour, and political subjectivity for the state and the crews.

Conclusion

The accounts and practices described throughout this chapter point to the centrality of communication, performance, and representation in the everyday labour of working crews at the Serbian–Hungarian and Serbian–Croatian borders. Far from being reducible to clandestine logistics or criminal entrepreneurship, the labour of crews is imbricated in life and labour along routes as a material critique and identity-making. Their activities and self-representations destabilise the neat binaries of smuggler versus victim, criminal versus humanitarian, by showing how border-crossing labour is lived, narrated, and aestheticised from below.

The introduction showed how the borderlands become not only nodes in the logistics of mobility but also stages for cultural production. Everyday socialities at the borders are reframed by crews through performances of overcoming the hurdles of state bordering materials and personnel. Young men like Achraf connect with how border life is mediated through gestures, music, and spectacle, projecting an air of resilience and limited status and power in a hostile environment. The rap videos of artists such as Lady Miro dramatise

the conditions of life and labour at Horgoš, blending social realism and border crossing spectacle. Everyday border work becomes the raw material for aesthetic (re)production, where ladders, cash, and mobile phones are turned into symbol and status. Cultural practices are never only ornamental but are entangled with broader histories of racial and class structures, expressed through mobile common practices and narratives. What emerges is a sonic and visual world where the border worker is not merely a passive subject of control but an active protagonist.

If aesthetic performance offers one entry point into understanding crew life, inter-group violence provides another. The conflicts between groups such as 313 and 40059 cannot be understood through the state's narrative of inherent migrant criminality. Violence, rather, is materially produced through the political economy of externalised bordering and the emotional ties that connect trans-localities, revealing how the border regime is entangled within transnational socialities spanning multiple regions. For instance the stories from Aryan connects the border regime's influence in effecting places of origin where crew members knew each other's families intimately.

Situated in the borderlands, the EU-funded fences, the intensive Serbian policing operations, and the concentration of mobility into shrinking territories created conditions for violent competition. TikTok became both an archive and a map, as crews used the platform to communicate inter-group conflict and intra-group solidarity. In this sense, digital practices echo urban youth street cultures elsewhere, where "badness" is both lived and performed, and where grief and memorialisation of loss itself becomes communicative (Aguilar et al., 2024). This further brings light to the digitalities of the working crew, they document solidarity, everyday reproduction, and care within encampments, showing dimensions of crew life omitted from securitarian framings. Once again, the digital and the material were inseparable, with online practices both fuelling rivalries and humanising

crew members otherwise erased from official accounts (Trimikliniotis, Parsanaglou and Tsianos. 2015).

At the same time, the chapter has argued that border materials themselves become central to communicative practices. As Kesharvez (2024) suggests, smugglers recognise borders not as fixed sovereign infrastructures rather as potential materials that can be reconfigured. Working crew videos invert the logic of deterrence: barbed wire, fences, cameras, and police vehicles are turned into props for humour, mockery, and playful subversion. The act of cutting a fence, climbing a ladder, or taunting guards is not just a technical intervention but a communicative one, destabilising the symbolic authority of European nativism. Tools such as ladders and bolt cutters, necessary for breaching fences, become emblems of crew identity, proudly displayed on TikTok profiles or even seized and exhibited by the Serbian Ministry of Interior. In these performances, labour power is projected as spectacle, unsettling Orbán's claim to impenetrable defence and exposing the fragility of bordering technologies. As De Genova (2010b, cited in 2013) reminds us, these border infrastructures are postcolonial relics of racialised production, while in crew videos re-signified these stigmatised frames in their own resistance identities.

Finally, the question of branding and myth-making underscores how crews situate themselves within a transnational subjectivity. Crews adopt names, numbers, and insignia—313, 40059, 505, BWK—that become recognisable across social media platforms. These markers function simultaneously as entrepreneurial tools to attract passengers and as sources of masculine pride and belonging. TikTok and Facebook provide the stage on which crews build reputations and weave stories of strength, daring, and mobility.

The same symbols are equally (re)-appropriated from above by state authorities and media, re-coded into orientalist narratives of Taliban proxies or Islamist threats. Migrant, state and smuggler co-produce mythologies into the same communicative field in a feed

back loop of moral panic (see. Ferrrel, Hayward and Young, 2008). The visibility of social media content operates within circuits of surveillance and power, where self-representations can be both empowering and incriminating. The dual production of myth—from below by crews and from above by states—illustrates how bordering operates as a contested communicative regime, structuring not only movement but also subjectivity.

Across these different registers—performance, violence, materiality, and branding—the argument here has been that working crews are not marginal footnotes to the story of European bordering but central actors in producing its social, cultural, and political meaning. Their practices are deeply embedded in histories of racialisation and exclusion, whilst turning these structural constraints into moments of creative, symbolic, and communicative interventions. By reframing illegality as a site of aesthetic and material practice, crews partially subvert state power and reinvigorate its logics, even as they are also reliant on the political economy of bordering to justify labour and expertise. TikTok clips, rap performances, and digital memorials, the figure of the border worker emerges not as the passive object of sovereignty but as an active subject who re-articulates the very meaning of border economies into their own canvas.

Chapter 6 Border Activism: Performance, Trust and Knowledge in a Criminal(ized) regime

Introduction

“Look! These are all police numbers on my phone.”

The Syrian worker flicks his right-hand thumb up and down his phone to show me how many contacts he has on his list. The power of connections to state border personnel is what makes the working crew effective. The position of workers and their respective crews can be made untenable because of the unforgiving twists and turns of the Serbian central state’s policing methods and militaristic counter-smuggling operations⁸⁶. The corruptible, and bribable practices tops up the Serbian police officer’s meagre wage and is part of the smuggler’s ‘borderwork’. The close connection some of the working crew have with border police translates into the migrant’s chances of scaling Orban’s fence that evening. Standing outside Sombor camp (in late Oct 2023) the Syrian ‘coordinator’ is still flicking through his phone bragging about the contacts on his phonebook, he then mentions to one of the activists next to me:

“[they] have the numbers to call the police at the borders, so the passengers are able to be picked up on the other side!...But they (migrants) must have cash with them when they take the taxi, as they are often stopped by police before making it to the border crossing.”

Testimonies from the activists reiterate the reality of bordering at this time in northern Serbia, explaining the police can easily be paid on the spot, but the passengers must be equipped with cash — euros accepted. Hidden costs lurk in every segment of a journey or

⁸⁶ rather ad-hoc than coordinated

time spent languishing immobile in the borderlands. Many people on the move do not factor the excess, or they are not factored in their smuggling package, but they are costs that change the fortunes for someone that day or can set you back a month.

Depending on the connection the workers may or may not have with the police controlling the road heading northwards, relations dictate whether a taxi will be getting stopped or left to pass without checking. If you are lucky, police officers signals to the taxi to keep driving after he's checked to see who is driving, or a quick check of the number plate is enough. The affective and embodied labour of smuggling crews are performed, communicated from one actor to another. The perception that all is well organised could not be further from the truth, these relations are built on sand, they are extremely tenuous and prone to ad-hoc changes in decision making from central state and local officials.

Violence seemed to escalate in the night with a crescendo of police raids in the morning. While the next day the rhythm and sequence of events seemed to have been repeated, despite workers being taken from [colloquial NAME of squat] to police cells, or 500 police officers deployed for arresting a handful of suspected 'shooters', 'migrants', 'gang members'.

On other days, the 'passengers' in the custody of smugglers, would be found totally confused when police intercepted their trajectory to then be loaded onto large coaches back down to the far south where many Vojvodinians would not care to go. People from Vojvodina are snobs about 'the south': "south of Belgrade..the people...what can I say...simple...poor...stupid!'.

As the working crew member scrolls through his phone. The rumour is circulating that migrants can be picked off the streets and thrown into police vans if their identities fit the brief. Some have their ID cards taken. If they are lucky, they have a chance to get them back by paying the police officer. One activist-volunteer recently spoke to a migrant that tried to cross the border on 'free game', he was taken by police to a disused garage to stay on the floor for several hours. The young male was asked him to pay 450 euros to go back to the camp or go to 'jail'. The activist fills me in: "If they choose jail they get a discounted fee of 100 euros to be released early." Countless stories of ad-hoc relations of extortion permeates the borderlands and instills distrust and anxiety as every social relations is reduced to an economic one. From the position of the activist(s), the spectacle of police operations, crew power and control fed into a general sense of powerlessness. Activist faced a regime characterised by extortion, evictions and shootings.

The sense of powerlessness emerged as we, as activists, came to recognise that the core of the No Borders tradition lies in a commitment to building mobile solidarities through internationalist praxis and radical forms of social care. These practices are oriented toward countering the 'complex configurations of oppression, exploitation, power relations, and hierarchies' that structure life along migration routes and borders (Trimiklinotis and Tsianos, 2024, p.193). In northern Serbia Squats that were once relatively peaceful places of refuge⁸⁷, by 2023 had been turned into sites of work and extraction, rather than autonomous political spaces where solidarity and care could take place. This was internalised by activists as something they had next to zero influence in controlling. The profit motive had captured the north, tuning the regime into a competitive regime over whom profited from the spoils (see Hess and Tsianos, 2007 on the 'Border Regime').

⁸⁷ Interview with long term activist Anna. Leading up to 2022 when the violence started (see. Chapter4)

The positive enthusiasm of activists and migrants walking in large numbers across the route in what was named ‘The March of Hope’ in September 2015⁸⁸ did not resemble the current state of affairs in northern Serbia. In mid to late 2023 support from activists and associations mobilised by the scenes in 2015 were thin on the ground, and the ones left were working in an post-pandemic boom of mobility — the informal transit economy was structured, (dis)-organised and corrupt(ed) and many were taking their cut. How exactly does a ‘No Borders’ group of activists balance their ‘revolutionary process for popular self-emancipation, collective social and authority relations, and socialist democracy’ (Boggs, 1977b: 359) in the face of profit motive and security capital — ‘a transit fix’. According to Gauditz (2017) No Border embraces strategies outlined by Boggs — thus everyday practices should match the radically egalitarian goals of the movement. But as Gauditz points out it is easier to profess than it is to practice. This is an antagonism that runs throughout the chapter — balancing theory and practice, especially in a context of heavy external constraints. Furthermore, the radicalism of prefigurative politics tends to come from a position of comfort outside of the messy everydayness of ‘humanitarian distributions’ as it realises it has to contend with political economies of scale. Thus, the activist confronts a disjuncture between utopian imaginaries and dystopian futures, experienced as a tension unfolding in the present moment (until October 2023) (Kemp, 2024).

In this chapter, attention is given to the challenges activists have to face in a criminal(ized) context. Firstly what were the issues facing activists in extraordinary border socialities? And what strategies did activist groups decide to enact in order to navigate unpredictable policing and paternalistic crews? While border activism proposes alternative ‘socialities, alliances and solidarities’ to meet the political and social struggles of mobile commons, the visible dramas of bordering played out around the organisations. This leads to the second

⁸⁸ Hungary towards Austria the march of Hope

question; how exactly does a Prefigurative solidarity project work in a border regime structured on hyper-commodified relations?

The chapter will proceed with first describing the composition of NGO and ‘no borders’ activist groups which formed an inter-associational structure that acted as a support mechanism in an isolated institutional border setting. Each organisation I explore have differing genealogies, structural organisation, political norms, practices and protocols. Counter intuitively, based on their differing positions and approaches rather than divergence, the inter-associational structure meant the methods of each group converged, partially forfeiting and breaking with both organisation’s political norms, ideals and rules.

In the next section, the chapter explores the activist’s intention to practice radical social work from below (Trimikliniotis and Tsianos, 2024) and to uncover testimonies of violence as part of an ongoing ‘epistemic friction’ with bordering governance and practice (Davies, Isakjee and Obradović-Wochnick, 2021). To develop testimonials, a whole set of daily practices had to be maintained by activists. The social relations between activists and bordering regime from below enter cultural performance(s); in the form of an embodied negotiation meant to soften, rather than directly confront the overwhelming power. To produce reports and denounce state violence and murder (epistemic friction), a whole lot of border (social) work must take place.

In the last section of the chapter, trustworthiness is always questioned by activists when it comes to actors outside of the association, especially those perceived to not share the activist’s allegiances. Trust is not one-sided; it is relational, shaped by moments of both solidarity and deception. In Diaz De Leon (2020) journal entry on ‘transient communities’ along the Mexico-US route, she argues solidarity amongst travelling migrants can exist

even if the people do not share ‘common social ties’ or show mistrust to one another. A similar set of social relations pervaded northern Serbia, as the ‘transient communities’ of the working crews tended to hold knowledge and power over activists and people on the move for those short moments before crossing the fence. This section will explore accounts of how this played out in the everyday events of bordering and activist intervention.

Inter-Associational Structure at the border

The so-called Balkan route is home to activist organisations that referred to themselves as grassroots NGOs or identified as part of a internationalist ‘No Borders’ network (Mezzadra and Neilsen, 2013). Both organisational types primarily deliver what can be considered as humanitarian services but with a political contention framed as either border abolitionists or border critical. The political cultures differ between the two ‘types’, with two primarily involved in producing political advocacy reporting, while one of the groups practice ‘direct social action’ (DSA) (Zamponi, 2018) as an example of borderless futures and alternative political spaces outside of representational democracy. The latter is part of a wider political culture from anarchist and internationalist backgrounds whilst the former comes from the explosion of grassroots organisations that met the vacuum left by European states during ‘the long summer of migration or ‘migrant crisis’ in 2015. All the activities intended to build affective relationships with people living, working and passing through the borderlands, whilst in theory (and practice), not succumbing to a de-politicized or colonial form of humanitarian work (Picozza, 2021).

The groups I participated in all developed daily practices that can be considered ‘as part of a broader, reinvigorated struggle for the commons’ in the fight against national borders and capital (Anderson, Sharma and Wright, 2009). Based on their official discourse, even if two of the organisations were not explicitly a ‘no borders’ organisation, each adapted to

the contextual conditions on the ground that loosely reflected a ‘NoBorders’ practice of developing alternative socialities to humanitarian industrial complex, and political solidarity to various lengths.

These organisations in practice, partially interrupt the overwhelming systemic violence of bordering, by producing alternative knowledge about what is happening at the borders. The organisations publish evidenced based advocacy reports and social media communications — uncovering emergent and long standing themes of direct and structural violence through the collection of testimonies and witness accounts from migrants and other civil society actors⁸⁹. For the political side of NO border or border critical activism to flourish, the organisations I worked under boycott operating in institutionalised spaces (transit camp and reception facilities etc.), which were either controlled by the government’s own commissariat (Serbia) or international humanitarian agencies, alongside state police (Bosnia). By distancing themselves from the organisation of bordering, the idea is that these grassroots initiatives would have more autonomy to develop their own critical knowledge of the borders and engage in a political culture of direct social action:

Like being in a grassroots organisation allows you to access more people and to do more for people. Like if you want to make something happen for someone you can, because there's not really people looking over your shoulder to make sure you're staying on mission. Obviously there's different sorts of grassroots organisations, especially when you know, in Serbia, there's some flat hierarchies, and there's ones with more hierarchies, but in general I think being [with] a grassroots organisation you have more access to people and you can [get] people [migrants] to trust you a lot.

— taken from an interview with Long term Activist

The three organisations all differed ideologically and their intended method reflected this ideological difference. The border abolitionists attempt to co-produce solidarity with people

⁸⁹ contributions made to the Border Violence Monitoring Network, 2024

one the move, in the spirit of the autonomy of migration and the mobile commons (Papadoupoulous et al., 2008). For the ‘border critical’ groups, service provision was their ‘modus operandi’ and can arguably be conflated with paternalistic practices of charity and producing colonial relations, whilst ‘in the field’, practices were shaped by the socialities of the borderlands, not the other way around. Evidently, managerial constraints were not reflected in the borderland spaces we visited — rules had to be ‘broken’ for the project to be effective. Moreover, their commitment to ‘militant methods’ of evidence based border violence testimony taking.

Arguably all groups participated to some degree in re-producing ‘humanitarianism’ but these practices can also be seen as redistributive⁹⁰ and acted as ‘olive branches’ to gain the trust for people to open up about their experiences along the route; contributing to the epistemic friction organisations wanted to produce. To reiterate, while these groups were very different in their ideology and method, aims and goals, they converged more than they diverged because of contextual constraints on the ground (more below).

The border critical grassroots organisation was managed in a top-down way. Off-field middle managers would remind ‘in the field’ coordinators of the protocols in order to keep the projects away from the eye of the policing and border authorities in Serrbia and Bosnia. Regularly coordinators had to make difficult decisions in high pressure scenarios that would not fit within the organisation’s codes of conduct. When ‘in the field’ these constraints were bypassed to meet the everyday messiness of gaining access to sensitive areas in the borderlands. ‘In the field’ coordinators and activists demonstrated autonomy to shape the projects at the borders, in real time, to fit the moment and context placed by the other actors (on the whole crews and police). Moreover, both groups were reflective in

⁹⁰ redistribution of material resources, and labour of mostly legally privileged European precariats

distancing themselves from the state and crews to maintain critical clarity over bordering structures and actors⁹¹. What we lacked in support at the national level was reinforced at the local level. For instance, when I arrived to join one of the groups in May 2023, an inter-associational structure across the three different international grassroots organisations was in place. This acted as a support in the face of working in a criminalised and isolated environment (more on this practical conundrum below).

Organising In practice

Organising at the borders is firstly an attempt to both produce knowledge where crimes against humanity occur on a daily basis and secondly provide piecemeal material benefits and psycho-social wellbeing. Thus direct social action at the borders is an attempt to build a prefigurative internationalist space without borders, practising utopian ideals of breaking the boundaries between people from different parts of the world (Yates, 2020). Behind all of this is an oiled machine built upon the labour of mostly young people redistributing their surplus time and labour — in what Marx called ‘living labour’ into political work. I will briefly give you a snapshot of the structures of border abolitionist and border critical organisation.

The team would start most days between 9-10am, in order to conduct a short meeting to refresh exactly what we were all doing that day. This served to collectively remind ourselves whom was tending to what tasks and bring up any new developments that may require the team to re-structure the set plan(s) or upcoming days ahead. Almost everyday minor adjustments had to be made, for instance; team members swapping roles for the day, or bigger issues regarding the constant breaking down of old vehicles we would be

⁹¹ Loose networks and channels were made off the record with local NGOs sympathetic to migrant rights and denouncing violence. But they could not be seen supporting us as this may jeopardise their future funding and being shut down. My interview with one Serbian grassroots organisation in November 2023.

driving into muddy fields. Meetings were regularly conducted for internal group related agendas from mundane issues regarding cleanliness, to emotional matters of interpersonal and collective conflict. These were mostly handled within the privacy of the activist's base lodgings. When it came to 'public facing' element of our work, this consisted of daily distributions to isolated locations where people on the move were living and transiting. The Second public facing function we committed to was the inter-associational co-ordination with the other two groups that shared the same locations where we would all visit for distribution on alternate days.

When it came to our daily practices, five to six days out of seven⁹² evolved around making trips to the border(lands) for distribution. There was spatial distance between where our team(s) cohabitated in the town and the borderland areas where we would go out for distributions every day. Before taking the trip to the locations near the border⁹³, we would drive for ten minutes to the lock-up where we stored food and non-food items to be distributed that day. Someone would prepare food, the other non-food items (camping equipment, clothes), whilst others prepared the stock for the next day. The system was in a constant rotation with daily tasks of washing and drying clothes for re-distribution. It was an operation that mirrored a 'just in time' delivery service, reflecting the transient and temporal nature of mobility at the time.

On 'shower day'⁹⁴, the heavy lifting started. Me and another volunteer would share bringing the plastic pallets into the back of the van along with the electric pump and shower tents. To collect water for the showers and drinking water, there was a local water

⁹² Depending on organisation or team at the time

⁹³ distance and time depended on the location we were visiting that day. Closest locations were inside the town, the furthest location could be an hour's drive to locations outside Sombor

⁹⁴ Weekly showers were provided to various locations — squats, woodlands and farmer fields

station that kindly allowed us to fill out tank every day. A fireman's hose and a tap resembling an underground mains water system bursts out with high pressure water hitting the 1000 litre cubed water tank that sat permanently (except when once a week when it was disinfested) in the back of the van. After a short 5 minute wait, we were stocked with all the water for the 'shower distro' and drinking water for the day.

Once we were all packed and ready to leave for the borderlands, the doctors organisation would turn up roughly 15-30 mins before departing. This is the first time I meet Daisy⁹⁵ and Jenny. They had a certain air of confidence about them. I would later find out they had been active in the north of Serbia for 9-months already. They had experienced a lot together at the borders, and with their confidence came a seriousness too, one that comes with building knowledge over consecutive months working at the borders⁹⁶.

Daisy or Jenny (rarely at the same time, would split different location in one day (two teams, separate locations) lead their team of doctors, as they had the previous knowledge and kept close monitoring of the borderland squats and encampments we planned to visit. They acted like the central nodes for the other organisations to work round. They had the most experience, so a lot of the contextual changes that were happening were communicated through them, acting as an adhesive of knowledge glueing the three organisations together. Before we set out for distribution, we would have to conduct a pre-brief as to the latest developments that may (or may not) have happened in the borderland.

⁹⁵ All the names of individuals in this chapter have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity

⁹⁶ working consecutive months at the borders is exhausting

Daisy informs us:

“Today we heard that Factory was evicted last night. Migrants have been taken to the camp in Presevo [south Serbia], so it might be a lot less busy than we first expected. We also heard that there was a shooting near Factory last night. We are not sure if anyone has been hurt or if there have been any fatalities. We just need to bear in mind that the tension at the squat might be tense, so we need each of us to remember the safety protocols in case anything happens while we are there”

Across the three groups each had different structural compositions that loosely relate to how they operated. In the middle of the three groups were the doctors, a more top-down organisation whereby Daisy and Jenny coordinated a quick turnover of volunteer doctors that would spend up to 3 months in the north. Either side of the doctors were two other organisations that had similar functions, but with different approaches (see above). Both had a humanitarian aid function to help people on the move in a piecemeal way, through basic food stuffs and camping and shelter equipment and general health service provisions (showers and health products, ie soap, razor shampoo).

On the other flank, was the third group in the association — the more overtly political, ‘no borders’ organisation. This was the organisation I had spent most of my time. They would organise their own internal structures at a specific location where volunteers were living, with less, but by all means not without some managerial tendencies from off-field ‘country references’⁹⁷. The strength in bottom-up organising, made the organisation quick to adapt to contextual changes at the borders. For example, after the major operation in October 2023, they were able to move all their resources in the direction of mobility⁹⁸ to another

⁹⁷ ‘country references’ were permanent members of the organisation acting as a guide or point of reference for the volunteers

⁹⁸ within 3-months

base. In contrast, the other two organisations were left still waiting on decisions made by off field directors and board members⁹⁹.

When it came to the daily operations of the ‘no border’ team, flexibility and autonomy to take decisions that mirrored the fast changing rhythm of mobility at the time was an asset, but this could lead to multiple ideas, differences in opinion and different strategies to execute direct actions and made internal decision making complicated. Many decisions were taken because ‘people [activists] take things quite hard’¹⁰⁰ when it came to the stories of state crimes against people on the move, and the emotional labour of activism that places ‘social care’ as one of its core principles, takes its toll on the volunteer’s psycho-social state (see Gauditz, 2025 Activist Burnout in the ‘No Borders’ movement).

This emotional labour tended to reflect the team’s composition, developing their own style and approach, although this was tempered by the inter-associational structure that had been established over the past year in the north of Serbia. This moderating effect on an otherwise messy, sporadic, but creative approach to border activism, was partly down to the continuity of the longer term activists from the Doctors and the other humanitarian group. Any proposal or changes in plan or practice that had direct influence on the other groups had to be put to an agenda at the bi-weekly inter-associational meeting. Substantial changes in approach, ideas, or practice would be placed on the agenda, discussed and approved (or not) by the other (less radical) groups. For minor actions or changes we would discuss in pre-brief and de-brief meetings internally or on the instant messaging board¹⁰¹.

⁹⁹ for one organisation it took them over a year to change location and other roughly 6-months

¹⁰⁰ Interview.9 with activist

¹⁰¹ one instant messaging group for de-brief reports from all three organisations, along with other messaging groups referring to other activist activities: one for police and FRONTEX observation, one for arranging meetings, another for advocacy report writing material and coordination

But this did not always happen in practice — with groups having their own interpretations of what boundaries were set, especially when the issue of how much we engaged in interpersonal relationships with people on the move¹⁰². For the horizontal group, they wanted to avoid replicating the managerialism of capitalist work cultures, while the top-down organisation would emphasise safety of the volunteers, and the vulnerability of the ‘beneficiaries’ (migrants), which stymied interpersonal relations¹⁰³. What was radical about the horizontal group was not just their dedication to meeting the material needs of migrants in the face of criminalisation, it was by centring (social) care at the heart of their political practice, steering away, or at least being reflexive about re-producing coloniality that have come to be equated with liberal forms of ‘humanitarianism’ (Trimiklioni and Tsianos, 2024; Fassin, 2011; Picozza, 2021). In the context of a criminalised border regime, the safety of activist-volunteers was constantly a point of contention, with organisations taking different positions and practices, never fully converging on a set of ‘best’ practices because of the different political philosophies and genealogies of each group and its individuals.

One of the issues facing our horizontal structure was the passing down of knowledge that informed our practice. As part of the anarchic history of the group, they did not believe in reproducing leaders (coordinators). The idea was so not one person or splinter group would have the monopoly on knowledge and ideas (I.e shape the projects). Through my own observation and time spent with multiple teams in the horizontal setting; time working ‘in the field’ (labour) equals to social relations and knowledge production being

¹⁰² for instance, the horizontal group had ‘care’ at the centre of their work, this meant building closer inter-personal connection to the migrant population. The doctors and the managerial organisation took issue with some of the methods of the organisations as they were seen as crossing boundaries. Thus differences in methods were the cause of disagreement.

¹⁰³ this really depended on whom was the field co-ordinator on that particular day. On some days I was able to have deeper conversations with people on the move, while on other occasions I was aware not to enter certain conversations based on the preferences of the individual and not jeopardising my position and the organisation’s.

made which can then be converted into internal team decision making influence and agenda setting in the field (power). Despite this being a feature of all organisations, No Borders anti-hierarchical groups maintained a three months maximum volunteer time in one location, which meant there was a quick turnover of people entering and exiting the organisation at X or Y location¹⁰⁴. The draw back from this structure was activists would leave without passing vital information for everyday things related to the upkeep of the house to more sensitive information about individuals we would come into contact during distribution visits (migrants and workers), local agencies, contacts sympathetic to the 'No Borders' cause that mostly made the work more impactful. Sometimes, new arrivals were not briefed on the above information, and many came with limited to no experience in a deeply volatile political and social dynamic at the border. It would take some weeks to get up to speed with the pace of change from being in the 'civilian world' to a 'bordered' one.

The experimental 'chaos' of structuring horizontal decision making within an organisation that is constantly being reshaped by the coming and going of its participant activist community, led to moments of discontinuity, yet it also brought moments of renewal¹⁰⁵. This discontinuity was in stark contrast to the other organisations that had long term, semi-permanent coordinators. For instance, time overlaps and hand over periods for the next volunteer or coordinator to take their place meant knowledge had been passed along a continuous chain, whilst in the horizontal group, individuals would sometimes leave with no days left to hand over the allotted tasks to the next volunteer-activist.

¹⁰⁴ and the border rules meant people could not spend more than 3-months in Bosnia or Serbia over a 6-month period. People would stay for on average 1-3 months, so the teams were always changing composition. Different personalities, skill sets, political backgrounds shifted monthly.

¹⁰⁵ People would come and go, bring with them skills and knowledge into the space, develop ideas and as quickly as they arrived would take those skills without passing them down to other members of the team. This could be as simple as not bringing a football to the distribution. The football would give people moments to take a momentary break from the realities they lived for a few hours, it broke the rhythm of the bordering regime and the mindset of the people living under it. And when one person left the field the others that may not be interested in football would return without the ball, would change the outcome of the distribution and experience for those dependent on the football. Equally, new people entering the team meant new skills could be incorporated into the team making for new openings of experimentation which offered not only new engagements with migrants, but also would unleash life into teams that may have lacked energy and creativity in their approach in that moment.

To illustrate this point, I personally came up against this issue when I arrived in Subotica with the horizontal group. I was tasked with keeping the daily finances of what we were spending in order¹⁰⁶. I was shown by Maria, an outgoing activist, all the receipts that had not been updated on to the system — with some of the receipts dating back 6-months. It would take me two months to have the financial books up to date. It was understandable why such a time lag that had plagued daily financial book keeping, as the daily practices of preparation for and long days out at distributions did not leave much other time for ‘back room’ administrative tasks. In contrast, the managerialism of the other group, the country coordinator dealt with the day-to-day finances and expenses of the organisation.

When it came to the inter-associational structure at times acted like a taming mechanism to the autonomous character of the horizontal group. Firstly, this was down to an understanding between all the groups that they were sharing the same spaces where distributions took place. Thus the idea was one group’s actions would be a reflection on the rest. Thus a broad unwritten set of rules and principles for the ‘field teams’ was shared¹⁰⁷. Second, the knowledge and time Daisy and Jenny had gathered compared with the quick turnover of volunteers of the other groups meant they were able to inform groups on what exactly were the dynamics in each distribution location we visited. This had a profound effect on how each organisation conducted themselves in these sensitive spaces and gave the pair slight authority over the rest of the organisation, although I can say they did not abuse this power.

¹⁰⁶ Each volunteer was tasked to fulfil duties in certain areas of the organisation (logistics, protection, finance, care, health)

¹⁰⁷ with many caveats and always under construction and changes

In the more managerial grassroots organisations, off-field directors and coordinators that set the checks and balances, ethical codes of conduct have limited reach and replicability in the borderlands at the practical level. If volunteers and coordinators were to abide by codes strictly this would have made the projects ineffective, and not sustainable for future donors¹⁰⁸. Thus off-field managers had limited oversight on the daily contextual factors that influence actions in the field (during distros), this worked in reaching more people in need and more likely to justify further funds from donors. Despite the autonomy or structural ‘management’ of each group reflecting their political ideals of how their organisation operated, paradoxically, for the organisations to stay relevant and for border violence monitoring to be conducted, the dominant ethics of managerialist humanitarianism were pushed and broken by the ‘on the field’ teams for practical reasons to fit the contextual moment (Cazenave and Morales, 2024) (evidenced in the sections below).

Let me bring you back to ‘the field’. It is now late morning, verging on 12pm, and Daisy has just pre-briefed us on the previous night’s police eviction at one of the squats we regularly visited. We are also briefed by Daisy that there is a block on the main road (E-662) to the Factory squat where we are due to distribute because of road maintenance. So we will have to take a long way round, adding twenty minutes on to our drive.

We all confirm that we are ready to hit the road. Me and two others jump in one van, while the doctors (x2) and Daisy go with their rental car eventually taking the E-662 Westwards (plus diversion) to Sombor Factory Squat. On the way, the other two members of the team provide me with a kind of preparation talk as what to expect when we arrive at the Factory. They fill me in on how we will proceed with the ‘distro’; where to set up, how to position

¹⁰⁸ even in the ‘radical’ no Borders groups, they are reliant on future funds from a handful of ‘ethical’ private donors. They want to see spreadsheets with lots of numbers for them to rationalise further funding streams.

our equipment, where we will stand, how to distribute the most ‘in demand’ non-food items (camping equipment, shoes and clothes), and how long it should take to complete individual tasks. The meticulous planning, the pre-briefs, the prep-talk in the van made me anxious to say the least. It all seemed very different to my previous experience working with activists in south west Vojvodina, three years previous. The ‘only’ thing we had to be vigilant back then (late 2020) was the potentiality of being apprehended by the local police department, contrary to any choreography the two activists were describing in the van. This was my introduction to daily interventions in the north of Serbia that beared no resemblance to my previous experiences, nor have they ever since¹⁰⁹.

Performing Direction Social Actions in Criminal(-ised) Settings

The biggest challenge facing activists was finding people that needed our assistance. When out on distribution our ‘mobile’ services¹¹⁰ were always conducted ‘in the field’, (i.e. in crew ‘territory’) and the local police’s ‘jurisdiction’. Whether we were outside a transit camp, approaching a ‘hidden’ encampment in the forests that hugged parts of the Hungarian fence or entering one of the ex-farmhouse buildings squatted by crews housing passengers and autonomous travellers, the chance of being intercepted during a police action or a working crew feud was something one remained vigilant and took as a realistic eventuality. Daisy and Jenny relayed to me the phenomenon of having to conduct distributions and medical care visits in volatile social environments:

“the fact that each squat was run by human smugglers. So, like just the danger aspect of each place that we went to and keeping volunteers safe, and the people supporting

¹⁰⁹ I previously spent three months in the border town of Sid, Serbia in 2020. The atmosphere in the squats were much more calm and the levels of violence compared with northern Serbia were never experienced nor recorded during my time there.

¹¹⁰ We would travel with our van to transport materials and supplies for people on the move (food and on-food items). Migrants on the whole isolated to the squats in the borderland, away from citizen spaces (urban dwellings in the nearby towns).

[doctors] safe. There wasn't a squat which wasn't run by a gang. And then the second issue was the police.”(IV11)

“I guess like all these sites where we're distributing, they're all managed by working crews....this is obviously a dynamic which was ever-present and had to be managed...we would distribute [to] where people [would] sleep but this would change depending on evictions, the police evictions of the squats” (IV12)

Across the inter-associational group, we planned our distributions to fine detail. Sometimes this was an issue for coordinators having to take on volunteers that brought with them assumptions based on legal, cultural political and moral norms. Some of the activists went under a kind of ‘decolonizing’ experience during their time at the borders. As one of the volunteers illustrates:

“Trying to soften the blow a bit, or get people to understand what actually was at play here, it was[mimics a new volunteer] “oh my goodness, I'm not working, I'm not treating a smuggler, I'm not doing this”, and then, they come back [from medically treating people] and they're “oh so-and-so's really nice, what a sweet boy. Gosh, what a horrible thing that's happened to him,” And I'm like, “yeah, you do know he's working? [emphasis here from the respondent to the contradictory position one takes]” (IV11)

Conducting activism in this context is always prone to criminalisation charges and teams were aware of this and made decisions in an attempt to mitigate the hostile environment. Organisations planned what course of action to take for the distro, every step taken or readjustment in plans had to be discussed internally and communicated in the pre-brief:

“enter the squat from X entrance or approach the squat from the road or the farmer’s lane, [upon reflection] or maybe we shouldn’t because yesterday another team of activists spotted ‘the pigs¹¹¹’ conducting random car checks.”¹¹²

For whatever planning was devised, it did not prepare teams for exactly how many people will arrive for our distributions and what the atmosphere was going to be like. Every distribution was different, although after several visits, the more experienced teams would know what to expect from specific locations whilst we were there. Regardless of getting to know crew members and becoming accustomed to the spatialities in which teams visited daily, the unnerving context of evictions, shootings, verbal confrontations, physical fights, non-verbal aggressions, manipulative behaviours from the police and workers, all collapsed into a series of events that happened every hour of every day in the borderland¹¹³. One week before I joined the group in the north of Serbia (May 2023), an emergency evacuation took place after a gun was brandished during distribution. On another occasion in the April, a young man, not known to the activists was stabbed at the Factory, located outside Sombor town. What was paramount for activists, was the anxiety that we would be caught in between an act of violence with no power to diffuse it.

In response to the violence at the Factory squat, one of the NGOs circulates a contingency plan between the different organisations. My group, called for an urgent meeting to take place the next morning, to discuss whether we would return to Factory. We had to make a quick decision, since the weekly rota was tight and relied on different organisations to co-ordinate. Secondly, the quick decision had to be made in reaction to the transient, fast paced reality of mobility in the north of Serbia. A tight rota had to be consistent with when

¹¹¹ Activists named one of the several Instant Messaging groups ‘Pigs’ for local, national police and FRONTEX monitoring

¹¹² Emphasis from field notes

¹¹³ Distribution was carried out from late morning till late afternoon (11 - 17pm) in the summer months

we arrived (time, and day), one long term activists relayed to me their worry if we were to change our plans or not arrive at a set day, this may disrupt the rhythm of the working crews that controlled the squats.

When we approached squats, our daily actions were performed in the hubbub of border worker squats which resembled airport terminal or a just-in-time logistic depots, rather than an abandoned factory or a squatted house. After a while, there was clearly a power dynamic that we as activists could only speculate on, sensing the collective power of coordination between the crew members in the background whilst we went about performing distribution. Tensions would rise depending on a number of factors, but mostly the amount of police in the area, or whether the central government had conducted ‘counter smuggling operations’ that day or the previous night. On other days and in different cases, internal feuds and rival shootings was a permanent fixture in ‘everyday life’ at the border, local police evictions or simply petty disagreements within the crew that day all had a cumulative effect on the atmospheres of the more contentious and busy locations. For the hours we were present in the squats the mood and dynamics of the place could change at the flick of a switch, reflecting the worker’s affective labour in intense living and working conditions — especially in the north borderland ‘squat circuit’ in Serbia¹¹⁴.

In response to the unpredictable dynamic, activists developed positionality switching cloaked in the language and practices of safety procedures, coping mechanisms, and alibis. These were all performance tactics in which myself and team mates consciously and unconsciously became accustomed to act out during the distribution. Whereas Clare (2017) underlines the disjuncture of the activist’s perceived and performed positionality, and the

¹¹⁴ Sometimes guys would work in one squat and then you would see them at another the follow days. Locations and people were not fixed, social relations between locations not bordered, although there was clearly contention in some of the locations relating strictly to core groups and members.

shifting between the two as negotiated internally, I would argue in the case of border activist practices, this is done collectively¹¹⁵. When we were at a location during distribution a relational ‘performance’ had been enacted — our behaviour; verbal and non-verbal adaptations to our selves was an attempt to accommodate to the not so familiar context in which we found ourselves visiting (see Conquergood, 1994 acts of engagement). Every day we were performing at our opening night at the theatre, without having done the dress rehearsal, but this performance was a cold piece of non-fiction that intersected with the dynamics and the unwritten ‘laws’ of the border lands that we had very little control over.

One of the biggest issues was being conscious of the worker’s hierarchy and the hierarchy and power produced between us, them and the passengers we were treating for medical or supplying with trainers¹¹⁶. In an attempt to counter this dynamic, our own sense of how we may be perceived in the performance had to be at the forefront of our actions. One of the long term activists that worked in the north of Serbia for over 12-months relayed to me, that they pretended not to know potentially sensitive rumours from working crew members, which affected the way she conducted herself in the working crew’s space. By regulating her verbal and non-verbal cues as a conscious act of resistance to the unequal power dynamics of ‘workers’ and ‘passengers’ she explains:

‘every conversation in the squats was so calculated, like, I was so hyper aware of who I was talking to, and who I was giving my attention to. I do not want to be perceived by the people that were travelling [passengers] that we were under the control of these people [crews], because, like, what use am I, if I’m super friendly with the “scary guys” [crew members with power and abused that power]...No-one’s going to come and receive healthcare, so what am I doing there? Like, what is the point?’

¹¹⁵ between the group and other groups, in this case working crew and police units

¹¹⁶ in a context of extreme scarcity, something as mundane as a pair of trainers can cause commotion and power dynamics to intensify

The spaces we entered, by the night were reported by the media and working crew TikToks as territorial conflicts for control of northern Serbia, but by the day, Daisy was coordinating a group of doctors that entered spaces under the unspoken control of these crews. Long term activists would absorb many conversations from the workers as they engaged in lengthy and labour intensive medical treatments on the passengers under the crews custody. What this allowed for were uncensored conversations. The activist felt like her gender played a part in how she was perceived as “a blonde woman...dumb as fuck” in a male centric space, although personally the close proximity and regularity in our encounters allowed for unfiltered information. This made her have moral judgements on some of the individuals controlling the spaces, but more importantly this influenced her decision-making to mediate power dynamics:

“we really knew, so much, we really knew a lot of the individuals, and a lot of it was peacemaking. I was terrified, and I wouldn't want to tell them [some of the working crew members] to “fuck off”, but also, there was people that I just wouldn't entertain, because I didn't want them to think I wanted to be their friend, because I just, I didn't want to hinder people [passengers] coming to use our services.”(IV11)

Performing roles with the intention of not re-producing existing power structures was something that was narrated to me by another group of activists in late 2024 on the far west of Vojvodina, near the town of Šid. It was a well known section of the route controlled by long term working crews from Afghanistan, and had remained relatively undisturbed, with no other ‘networks’ active in the area¹¹⁷. But this did not mean that the workers didn’t have their own internal conflicts. This had direct repercussion on the types of information activists would say in front of the crew, thus withdrawing certain info (as discussed above).

¹¹⁷until a temporary period shortly after the operation in northern Serbia

The team active in Šid, chose not to vocalise that they were making visits to another squat the same day. As a precaution the team did not want to exacerbate any feuds or differences that existed between individuals from the same or different crews. According to the activists, one section of the crew splintered off and controlled one of the locations after they had disagreements with the others — differentiating themselves from the others. One of the workers had been active in the area for at least 4 years¹¹⁸, referred to by everyone as Charlie. He would make hints that he knew the activists were visiting other locations, and tried to influence their actions. During an interview with one less experienced volunteers, she narrates to me her ongoing predicament with Charlie. She tells me how on one occasion (but not the only time) she was under pressure to lie in front of him and other workers:

he today asked me: “where are you, why are you in the House of the road?” And I can interpret that [he means] the Chalk Station.

And I responded: “What are you talking about? I'm in Šid, in this park.”

he just changes topic.....But I really think they [working crew] knew [where we were]...

I think Chalk Station¹¹⁹ and Harry's Garden tolerate each other [refers to the groups by their locations]...but can't stand Rum Squat. For example, like not now, but before. We were going to two squats in one day ...and the day that we were for example in [Chalk House] and then to [Rum's Squat]. We cant say out loud, “we have to go to Chalk House now”. I think they know we go to Chalk house], it's been a problem because now S is a worker with N in Rum's Squat.”

Activists found themselves having to make up stories about which places they were visiting. The Italian activist assumes dropping the names and locations could re-ignite the rift between the crew members. I can speak from my own countless visits to squats, activists are under pressure to not play into hierarchies, or disturb them. It is a fine

¹¹⁸ I first met C in the winter of 2020-21

¹¹⁹ The names of the locations are given pseudonyms

balancing act to keep in order to be able to carry on with trying to access people that are in the most need. The enactment of withholding information and non-verbal body language is intensified during distributions, when the transactional flow of everyday communication is produced from the embodied labour of border workers and activists which enter a performance (Conquergood, 2013). The performance is what Turner (1983, p.338 in Conquergood, 2013) argues are social meta-commentaries, they mirror the ongoing social processes, whereby people can interpret themselves to themselves as well as to others. Thus the 'distribution' is a cultural performance, played out in a precarious context that no-one (workers, passengers or activists) had a total monopoly of control over. The activists punctuate for a moment (for a few hours), but without disturbing the overpowering force of the regime, thus requiring non-verbal communications to be able to go undetected and not cause any unwanted suspicion¹²⁰.

Operating within bordering regimes, activists worked in criminal(ized) socialities, Kemp (2024) finds activists develop coping mechanisms in their political culture by projecting future political realities. In what the author (ibid) terms as 'activist edgework', he describes activists reflect on dystopian futures, while I argue border activists engaged in impossibly unequal power dynamics that could never be resolved — which felt tangibly as dystopian presents. Volunteers undertook performance strategies to not rupture the hierarchy that was always present, while not stepping into co-opted relations dressed up as trust.

Relational (dis)-Trust and Knowledge Hierarchies

The bordering practices of police, crews and local non-state actors meant the experience of activists always verged on collective sense of confusion as to what exactly were the social

¹²⁰ Suspicion and/or distrust is a permanent fixture in the borderlands no matter how much political solidarity one feels they are making

relations that maintained bordering across Bosnia and Serbia. Me and team mates would often speculate on what was “going on out there”, “who is in charge?”, “what’s the relationship X crew has with police?.” For activists to plan and strategise everyday practices, they had to draw from a range of sources of information that were contingent on the knowledge and experiences of long standing migrants living and working the borders (see. Andersson (2014) on the ‘professional migrant’). On a daily basis, activists would have to handle various and disparate fragments of information that had to be factored into the equation of future direct actions (mainly distributions, changes in events and border violence monitoring). These pieces of information were always weighed up based on the relational trust built between the crew’s and the activists.

On the 1st August 2023, messages started to circulate that there were multiple evictions happening in and around Subotica town. Me and my team mates were asking each other why the police made the decision to escalate evictions that day¹²¹. We would hear commotion from working crew members directing people to leave the location where we were distributing because of police sightings heading to X squat or Y encampment. Even though we had not broken any laws, except maybe trespassing on a private land (distros were a lot of the time conducted in farmer’s fields), we sometimes had to vacate the area before police arrived, whilst in other moments the police would intervene during distributions.

¹²¹ major operation took place on the morning of August 1st 2023. Later that day local police sprang into action evicting informal encampments in the borderland and inside the town.



Photo By L. Jabs: Two German Frontex officers chaperoned by local Serbian police officers intervening during a distribution at an encampment near the Tisa river (May 2023) (far left of photo activist and friend)

The crews often knew before we did roughly when and where police were operating, as well as what actions they were likely to carry out next. As I have already reiterated the frontline workers were not immune to the central and local state's decision to make a mass eviction and forced pushbacks to the south of the country (see. the story of John in chapter4). Moreover, low level workers often end up locked up in Serbian and Bosnian prisons whilst others were transported to transit camps. It was in their interest, just as much as ours, to

keep a 'low' profile, despite local police forces knowing exactly what we were doing and whom we interacting with in the borderland¹²². This criminal(ized) reality added to was a general sense of distrust and paranoia which reflected the team's conduct. Throughout my time during fieldwork every one of those moments of fear in being criminalised, I was with a team of seven or eight 'foreigners' in a country none of us hardly understood in an intensified socio-spatialities of state corruption and ambiguous relations¹²³. Thus a siege mentality within the groups can create a pessimist and hostile outlook to your initial surroundings, making teams look further inward and at times quick to pass judgement on the local people.

In moments of confused state and general distrust and sometimes paranoia activists had to weigh up the validity of information they observed from rumours and hints overheard from inside the squats, or directly communicated to us. These fragments of 'knowledge' were always a point of contention and discussion for teams to discuss. Questions followed: how much trust could be given to the sources and what were their intentions for relaying such information?

As crews seemed to hold the monopoly over what was happening in spaces we visited, their words were taken seriously, as some claimed to have knowledge on future state bordering tactics, which would always prick up the ears of any conscientious activist. Information was taken to different levels of validity based on interpersonal trust or prior predictions that so happened to come to fruition.

¹²² countless times activists are stopped in the most suspect areas next to squats and sometimes during distributions. The police were ambivalent during my time in the field and criminalisation of the activists at the everyday level was mild, although on a handful of occasions we were stopped by police and ask to look in our delivery van.

¹²³ ambiguous between crews and police

Knowledge of the crew members were given various degrees of influence as to the next action(s) activist may or may not take. For epistemic friction to take place, partial reliance on long term, trusted workers. They are the most knowledgeable and most of these men had been on the 'wrong' end of police brutality on several occasions. Not only was their knowledge relevant and insightful, their sensibility to maintain their own power sometimes rested upon exercising their own gatekeeping sensibilities. For us activists access to these spaces were paramount where the potentiality for a border violence testimony or moment of solidarity making with people on the move, could take place was central to our 'borderwork'. But not all could be trusted or relied upon, mainly down to the distance organisations wanted to maintain for the reasons outlined in the previous section. It must be said most of the time this relation, and position from individual activists and the organisation's 'codes of conduct', contributed to teams having an ambiguous and tenuous relations with some of the long term border workers.

This ambiguous relation, was furthermore communicated to us activists. As one of the activists tells me during distributions in the north in September 2023:

I mean, you couldn't have, like, open conversations with the people [migrant passengers] because, for example, you would have a conversation with the passenger even with your phone, with the translator...working crew [individuals] would be there immediately, like reading, like being very, very invasive. (IV1)

Volunteers often relayed the feeling of not being trusted by the working crew members. Workers would sometimes come across rude, arrogant and intimidating. One of the activist-volunteers situated at the Sid border outside Adesevci camp relays to me this interaction during the distribution:

“for example when some worker.. when you start to talk with some worker, the worker offers you cigarettes, offers you chocolate and just wants to get to know but know you better because you are somehow going inside my area and “I’m OK with that. But Who are you? Where are you from?” they ask me “Where are you from?” not in a curious way, say ohh just new people with chat. “How are you? Are you doing well?” they are trying to understand who I am, which kind of person I am. And I mean, I’m OK with that because I completely understand and maybe....If I were in their situation, maybe I will do the same thing, and for me it’s totally fine. I mean it. It’s, it’s normal. It’s their life because they are living in that situation for months and months. And also if new people arrive, people leave [volunteer activists]....This kind of dynamic stays...”

To give the interviewee’s words context, this was a period in which the counter-smuggling operation had already been underway. A transition phase was happening and this particular crew [member] was still active. The crew previously worked in the Sombor borderland and camp in ‘Little Syria’. By January 2024, people were being forcibly removed to the west. This would have been a huge shock to the system that had been created in the last two years and paranoia, anxiety from working crew members escalated in a moment of uncertainty because of the police crack downs.

The diminishing power turns to desperate acts to maintain control over migrants by restricting their ability to have mobile communications. During interviews with two activists, they both relayed a moment with ‘a boss’ running one of the busiest squats in the region. The sense of powerlessness from activists comes with a lack of trust, and again not being able to intervene in the social life and structured paternalism working crew had with ‘passengers’. According to the activists the ‘boss’ “played two faces”, acting out of desperation to the activists laying the blame at the police for his own actions:

[he was] like crying [sic], he say. “look, what the police did! [pointing to the burnt squat]”, and another guy send us a message and say “They [police] arrive [at the squat] .

They beat many people and they deported them, but they didn't destroy the place....Always it's with 2 levels [deceiving]. You never know what's going on.

Another volunteer in the team relays a similar version of events:

We went there, there was the same working crew and this guy was a big boss was like....He was almost crying. He gave us a whole tour of the building inside, "the police destroyed everything" [Boss] like he showed us around all the windows smashed, he was giving us simulations of the police, like destroying things....So really sad [and we were] "sorry". Like just empathising a lot. And then, I kept in contact with one of the passengers at the ranch that day, and he later messaged me "the police didn't destroy this place, ...it was the working crew."

In other, less dramatic moments, the contestation over trust reached a limit leading to the break down in social relations. For instance, at one of the active squats controlled by Ali a long term worker from Syria, would always attempt to have control over distributions. He protests week after week in the spring and summer of 2023 that our distributions were ineffective in finding the most in need. Ali claims he knows exactly what we need to do to rectify our poor judgement, based on information he obtained and we could not confirm with our own observation(s):

"There are people camping in the 'jungle', on the other side of the road, they haven't eaten anything for many days...but they are too scared to come out, but you keep giving [food and non-food items] to these people [in X location], they do not need it as much as the people on other side"

Throughout the period (spring and summer of 2023), Ali insisted activists should provide for these people, but blocked us from entering the woods, as according to him as a precaution not to attract police to their encampment. But without an 'assessment' of the encampment, activists refused to comply. This was taken as a mark of distrust and lack of respect. Something that had been worked on for years before the eventual breakdown.

Despite not taking actions on his request, this was a reoccurring predicament activists contended with on a daily basis, especially in the more managerialist organisation. Teams discussed in formal inter-association meetings and informal settings what course of action to take with Ali; either to bypass him, or take no action at all, both were considered as a way to circumvent his power. The first option is potentially dangerous and was never seriously contemplated, we did not know how Ali would react. Relations eventually broke down by taking no action. One of the teams decided to not return after death threats were made to two long standing activists who were at the end of most of Ali's protestations.

To be able to build counter-knowledge and radical social care from below into political solidarity work at the borders, the people working and living the routes can be allies in this pursuit. This knowledge cannot be forged without an element of trustworthiness built into the activist's toolbox. As I have already pointed out, quick turnover of activists can hamper the chances of building trust. Without trust with the people that lived and worked in these spaces the projects are limited in their scope and epistemic friction. But trust is relational. It takes two to build it. The social worlds of the workers created a 'protective ring' that us activists were always implicitly probing, while creating distance as not to disturb the border regime's rhythm and unspoken 'laws'. Most of the social relations that happened within the proverbial ring became extremely commodified relations with little solidarity to be seen. The profit motive kills trust, and spawns paternalism, at times coercive care and protection, thus maintaining a border gap in knowledge. For the radical intention of border abolitionists to conduct social direct actions at the border, the constant dynamic of 'varied configurations of knowledge and non-knowledge are entangled with power, technology, subjectivity and resistance' (adapted for emphasis from Aradau and Canzutti, 2025. p.1012). The opportunity for solidarity making or building alternative knowledge from

people affected by the regime's violence was in short supply as the squats and non-institutionalised spaces outside of the transit camp system were captured by the state and local systems of smuggling governance are turned into open-air, profit-seeking socio-spatialities. There was not much internationalist solidarity making to be seen at this quite dystopian chapter in the passage's history.

Conclusion

Organising at the borders is contingent on activists with surplus time and labour. An activists' commitment to creating 'epistemic friction' with the dominant narratives. Secondly, for the prefigurative politics of 'no borders' organisation I spent lengthy periods, political solidarity was at the centre of their work. Similar to what Trimikliniotis and Tsianos (2024) term radical forms of social work from below, attempts at creating socio-spatial mobile commons was undermined by the sheer commodification of social relations at the borders, especially in the north of Serbia.

Considering No borders activism is built upon boycotting the infrastructures and personnel of bordering (including humanitarian industrial complex and state institutions), it becomes an everyday challenge to work in spaces that are controlled by the non-institutionalised actors which also to various degrees entangled in the border regime's governance and control 'system'. In order for activists to carry on in challenging scenarios, they blend their own choreography or border performance. Activists planned sometimes to meticulous fashion how one went about 'the distro' under challenging circumstance. Positioning of the van, the sequence of actions, verbal and non-verbal cues and the retention of information is an intense context for an activist-volunteer to engage. Kemp's (2024) use of the 'edgework' concept is useful for us to grasp what exactly prefigurative activism is when it adapts to arguably dystopian presents — whereby transit realities are based on capital intensive relations. The world of the borderlands was a world in itself with

its own set of power relations and unwritten rules that we were always in close proximity. For several of the locations, long term coordinators felt as if they were walking a tight rope of a system they were fighting, to then have the realisation that they were entangled in its sphere.

The intersection of trust and knowledge was important for grassroot organisations to stay relevant and for the injection of donor funds to keep afloat (numbers (people served) translated into more numbers (financial and resources) to be spent on more numbers (people on the move)). To be able to operate in the semi-controlled spaces of working crews and police, any ounce of managerialism or moral puritanism had to be exorcised from the activist-volunteer, or coordinator. The activist relies on building knowledge on the basis of tenuous foundations, from people they may not like or assumed to be morally corrupted or even dangerous. As Daisy illustrated in this chapter, social relations built upon moments of 'health care' act as practical bridging moments that break down colonial presumption on the profile of a 'criminal-smuggler'. On the other hand, to build trust comes with building relations — equally workers are wary of activists. As I have already pointed out, the distribution is a staged affair, it is an opportunity for the activist to be in contact with people on the move, in an attempt to forge bonds and create common space. But in the harsh realities of transit economies, relations are always tenuous and sincerity is difficult to gauge and contested (Aradau and Canzutti, 2025). This became especially apparent when the smuggling ecology that had been built for several years in northern serbia started to crumble and the interpersonal care and compassion that was seen in moments that may have seemed genuine were built on primarily on economic relations.

Chapter 7 Conclusions

The demonisation of migrants as a security threat has been the default position of the European since the collapse of the Soviet Union and part of a wider project to liberalise trade. Part of the securitization lens to mobile populations are racialised discourses, images and policy prescriptions which characterise lived realities faced by migrants during transit. With over a decade of exponential spending on externalising the European Union's bordering capabilities, countries neighbouring the Schengen area have been chosen as laboratories of securitisation capital. The control over whom facilitates mobility in the terrain of militarisation infrastructures, are always contradicted by local non-state actors. When we look closely at the everyday socialities and materialities built from the political economies of bordering and transit, these structural and historical forces shape sovereignty as the ingenuity of human endeavour and the collective fight for life (and mobility) will always be a point of political contention at the borders. To paraphrase Bhattacharyya (2024), bordering is another arm of a wider fight of class war; the EU's preoccupation with laying the ground for a hostile environment feeds into a wider decline in autonomous forms of liberation and direct democracy. But this is not only about citizenship rights, this is a story about the economics of mobilities and transit. The globally dispossessed and exploited are found productive in the transit routes leading to Europe. One of the central questions of this enquiry is how certain bodies are absorbed and made productive within economies of transit and its organisation of labour along racial differentiation.

The existing research on 'materialities, socialities and solidarities' of transit overlooks the embedded materialities of smuggling as work and productive labour. Moreover illicit labour practices are inextricably linked to European, inter-continental and regional

markets which absorb surplus populations. Border regimes are not insulated from such global economic structures, in the seemingly isolated spatialities of Vojvodina farmland racialised subjectivities are produced in the logic of capital accumulation (Bhattacharryya, 2024; Trimikliniotis, Parsanaglou and Tsianos, 2015). The emphasis on labour as opposed to crime per se contributes in framing ‘parallel economies’ as a permanent feature of European and global political economy. Up until this point and continues to do so; the smuggler has been treated as a shadowy figure in the imaginaries of government manufactured moral panics and mediated criminogenic border spectacles from mostly legacy media, moral entrepreneurs and nativists. What has been explored in the study is that smuggling crew’s own mediated performances that document life and labour at the border. While smuggling crews not only shape mobility, they are also key in shaping social relations along the route that have in the past been filled by direct social actions of No Border activists. Thus the entanglement of labour, (in)mobility, and activism in political economies of bordering, and transit, have not been made in the current critical borders cannon (except for a few notable contributions from Bird and Schmidt, 2023 focus on NGOs, Landherr, 2024 on labour mobility and externalisation).

The first part of the study argues smuggling labour cannot be analytically treated solely as a game of cat and mouse in crime prevention and evasion. The labour of those participating in smuggling are part of a wider relative surplus population in the global economy — as populations are dispossessed, use their labour power to be mobile and are then exploited a second time in precarious forms of non-waged illicit labour markets in Europe. By reframing parallel economies to precarious migrant labour, smuggling can be conceptually treated as a central component in European border regimes, sustaining economic life along the routes and transnational connection to global structural inequality.

They have 3 productive properties:

- 1) surplus populations are made productive in the transit economies
- 2) They do the 'dirty work' of mobility facilitation that external states cannot be seen to be doing
- 3) Petty economic life of poorer migrants develops social differentiation between migrants in transit spaces; it divides those that can afford and those who cannot take part in providing services

In the second part of the study, focus is brought on the working crew's social worlds and the overlapping of the digitalities they produced on social media. Media has an undoubtedly huge part to play in governments reflexivity to ad-hoc governance. This governance is no longer the hegemony of legacy media, it is being shared by online digitalities of smuggling life and labour. The production of content tapping into solidaristic moments of in-group performances to conflict marking territory along fences and borderland. Their keen eye to detail incorporates border surveillance, materials and personnel into their video repertoires enters into a material critique of European sovereignty. Moreover the symbols and narratives from places of origin are placed within the video in a bricolage that repurposes their uninspiring materialities along the route. Videos portray their own subcultural language through performance, which then enter the political arena of ethno-nationalism in Viktor Orban's Hungary and the Serbian Ministry of Interior's (MUP) crime fighting choreography, published on its YouTube channel, only solidifying their infamy in the media hype; thus TikTok videos are re-narrated by state and media in 'dangerous othering' racialised tropes. The production of the 'smuggling gang' is not only a crew production, but a production of political expedience; one where the state

performs its crime fighting sensibility to the existential threat with levels of state violence and personnel, in an effort to curry favour with public opinion.

By uncovering video material that narrates the working crew's socio-spatialities can be conceptually treated as a re-orientation in how borders and migration routes are narrated visually (Triandafyllidou and Massari, 2025), not only from the point of prospective customers but in emotionally driven life and labour scenarios and struggles which unfold at the border and routes of Serbia and Bosnia. The working crew's content is empirically relevant in contemporary border politics for three reasons:

- 1) Moments of autonomy are communicated through conflict and solidarity in the precarious ontologies of bordering
- 2) Bordered cultural expression is an alternative script that places the workers as the protagonists in their own discourse
- 3) Videos reproduce myths around smuggling reputation as both a branding and a social control mechanism during transit and is further exploited into the media and state's narratives of fighting racialised subjectivities

In the last empirical chapter in the thesis, border activists from different political genealogies find themselves informally working together in an inter-associational structure. The three grassroots organisations under investigation converge in terms of the practices and strategies they adopt out of a necessity to operate in criminalised and commodified regimes of accumulation and to respect each others methods and approaches to border activism. Although the horizontalism of the No Borders group is practiced internally, it had to contend with blunting its radicalism in favour to keep the inter-associational arrangement ongoing. All the while, the managerialist organisation(s) broke

out of its restrictive belt to contend with the practicalities of activism in criminal(ized) spaces.

After I had spent multiple months participating and observing political life at the borders, characterised by the daily practices to access people on the move in criminalised circumstances, border activism entails a complicated set of strategies in an attempt to not be subsumed by power relations already existing in the political economies at the border. The chapter focuses on how the groups adapt to the overwhelming force of bordering and working crew labour and life in the following ways:

- 1) Groups contend with balancing political work with humanitarian service provision
- 2) The 'distribution' can be equated to a performance for activists as they strategise on how to conduct actions in criminal(ised) materialities and socialities
- 3) border activism was shaped by unstable trust and fragmented knowledge structured by power and criminalisation. It shows that bordering operates through relational regimes of (dis)trust, where access to knowledge reflects contested social relations and unequal mobility.

Empirical and Theoretical Reflections

What this study demonstrated was the multifaceted nature of bordering. It's materialities and digitalities, connections to labour and political economy and its intersections with political solidarity in contentious spatialities next to the Schengen border. This ethnographic study leads into three main theoretical findings discussed below: First, drawing on political economy and labour studies frames human smuggling as part of the

wider political economy of European shadow labour and illicit economy, historically sedimented in racialised regimes of accumulation. In doing so, it contributes to critical scholarship that challenges dominant criminological narratives about smuggling. Second, working crews cultivate their own mobile commons, digitally expressed through narratives of everyday life and labour. This represents an original contribution to understanding how borders, migration, and routes are communicated in their own terms, extending subcultural theory and intersecting with scholarship on digital mobile commons, youth and gang formations, social work, and cultural criminology. Thirdly, although border activism and their role in wider social movements has been written extensively across Europe, political solidarity initiatives at the external borders of Schengen in criminal(ised) contexts have limited empirical attention. The contribution brings to life the antagonisms inherent in radical direct action from below against the overwhelming economic and political power of economic processes that differentiate populations and commodify social relations.

Labour, Race, and Border studies

Border governance is heavily shaped by the labour of migrants in everyday scenarios at the external non-EUropean territories. As the literature review suggests, state sovereignty and clandestine border crossing have been treated between two paradigms which hold various degrees of importance in how sovereignty is constructed from different actors. Technological driven understanding of sovereign power over migrants are given more weight over the autonomous actors which precede border technology. But what these two strands fail to understand are the materialities of bordering and routes faced by people that work and live along them and their connection to emerging forms of surplus

accumulation and their continuation in the racialised histories of global capital accumulation and imperialism (Walia, 2013).

Building on this, the explanatory power of Relative Surplus Populations (RSP) has been previously used by Bird and Schmidt (2023) to interrogate the border regimes and the actors that work within them as another set of relations implicated in the reproduction of global capitalism. Also borrowing from Bhattacharyya (2018; 2024) recent books on forms of racialised surplus accumulation, thus positioning working crew as not only facilitators of cross border movement they function productive roles for ‘social reproduction’ during (im)mobility. These authors are indebted to the ‘Racial Capitalism’ theoretical framework, which reframes border regimes as capital intensive fixes (Harvey, 1981) and, second, does not essentialise the politics of bordering and migration as something isolated from the wider political economy. Rather the theory opts for a historical materialist reading of labour in the economic life that exists within regimes of control and surveillance.

Casting back to Aryan’s story¹²⁴ in the introduction of chapter 4, is one of global displacement born from a continuation and renewed imperialism that organises people into non-waged relations (Bhattacharyya, 2024; Walia, 2013; Zilberg, 2011). The lives of people are increasingly being pushed into parallel parts of the global economy because of a lack of opportunities to sell their labour power in order to survive, because some bodies are more exploitable than others (brown men from central Asia do not fight into the typical proletariat, precariat or salariat in European work and labour cultures) (Sodenberg and Brander, 2020; Rajaram, 2018). The global RSPs find their labour power productive and exploitable within the border regime. While Aryan’s body power is turned into labour power, his body is further made productive as a figure to be securitised. The state authorities created the conditions where Aryan was able to be productive in taking people

¹²⁴ All the names of individuals in this chapter have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity

across Orban's fence, and at the same time, Aryan was the poster-boy for criminal 'justice' and greater levels of security spending. Thus the state creates the 'problem' for the need for greater levels of securitisation capital. The border regime in the Western Balkan sphere is turned into a place of economic 'life' which cannot be read as natural laws of the market; rather, they are constructed in the long history of the construction of race, European capital and the uneven geographies of European capital and state-capital security spending.

The logistical planning that goes into crossing the fence was complex and situated, requiring the affective and embodied labour of crew members tested to an extreme level. Working crews and activists named the areas under colloquial location names where labour and border securitization intensified with daily operations from the central state, and daily evictions and bribes from local police. Within these bordered life 'worlds', the social reproductive roles are fulfilled to maintain accommodation for 'passengers' and working and living conditions for the frontline workers. As I have already mentioned, the social relations had been made commodified to the point where political reflection and solidarity was in short supply amongst activists, and the numbers of people travelling through this section of the route led to profit motives becoming more acute and the tightening of systems of control followed. I argued that human smuggling is underpinned not only by border crossing, they double up as affective labourers, cutting across the divide between intellectual and manual work. The Bourdieuan concepts such as social and cultural capital have been applied to the work of Nimkar and Mohammadi (2023), as smugglers have to contend with information and campaigns dedicated to their demonisation funded by the EU's enlargement programmes in Afghanistan, while affective relations are under researched as a prime soft skill, all frontline border workers were required to develop in order to maintain control, organise and communicate in chaotic circumstances.

The social and economic life along the route are not only exclusive to the spectacular moments of border crossing. Services are created from the poorer migrants found stuck in border towns and transit camps; they find a way to service the richer migrants for petty income. The original findings show how a host of services are created, especially where the state which intentionally creates a 'hostile environment' and the petty services from longer standing crew members fill in the gaps. Furthermore, work conditions of the guide are extremely precarious. Young men like Mustafa whom I introduced in the 'Petty economies in Moments of (Im)mobility' section are often compelled to sell their bodies into precarious forms of guide work, a survival option that renders them especially vulnerable to the organised and territorial crews who act as 'gatekeepers'—the most experienced actors in the underbelly of the border economy. The quality of services, the working conditions of smuggling depends on situated factors while as well as global regimes of accumulation from places of origin funding the transit economies. Individuals from one part of the world compared to others were more likely to be strapped with financial resources, and this was an opportunity for others to sell their services based on longer periods understanding the 'rules' of the borderland and the new arrival's capital. Thus the economics of transit shape social and cultural life along the route; it shapes the ways in which communities that find 'home' along the route interpret each other and each other's heritage.

Migration Governance and Media

The theme of a bordered subculture and intra-communal communication has appeared throughout this thesis. There is clearly a co-productive force between crews and the state; simply, there would not be a crew without an externalisation policy in Serbia. This co-production of culture and crime, where young men identifying as part of smuggling crews

perform a collective identity embedded in their socialities are exaggerate to effect through their own digitalities. The online performances of the crews crafted a border aesthetic — their ability and branding merged with repertoires of in-group solidarities and conflicts, symbolism and codes all drawn from their materialities as border workers. On the other side, the state and the media find the mystique of smuggling crews productive for their performative ‘war on smuggling’, used to sell more technical equipment, securitisation capital, and to garner political capital through bilateral partnerships, in a politicised spatiality of EU externalisation and securitisation capital (Harvey, 1981; Bird and Schmid, 2023; Landherr, 2024).

In migration and border studies, media and migration have largely been examined through how the state and legacy media frame images and discourses in a co-productive way. As the racialisation of mobility is made productive in the media’s spectacle, the idea of migrant “illegality” becomes productive for the capitalist state’s own interests and the interest of externalisation policies to prevent future movement, in the form of information campaigns deterring migrants from arriving on European shores and land borders (Heller, 2014). Nicolas De Genova’s (2013) “border spectacle” theorises mediated frames of border crossing invites liberal sympathy while constituting an “obscene inclusion” of exploitable labour, distracting from the structural violence migrants face.

Drawing on cultural criminology, particularly the work of Ferrell, Hayward, and Young (2008), this study demonstrates how state and media actors co-produce crime narratives through recurring cycles of representation, amplification, and repetition. Baudrillard’s ‘hyper reality’ thesis, repurposed in cultural criminology, captures how videos, media, and image surrounding the crews are whipped into circulated media spirals and loops across multiple media platforms. To re-illustrate Baudrillard’s hyper reality concept to the borders; crews produce on TikTok (and other digital platforms) content at the border

which is then re-produced by traditional forms of media, and re-circulated in the Serbian Ministry of Interior's YouTube channel and re-embedded into new media reports in the next news day/cycle. Their self-exposure generates infamy, which in turn inspires even more daring performances. This feedback loop culminates in orientalist pathologies of dangerous social types, leaked through pseudo-classified documents, and reflected in ethno-nationalist state violence.

While legacy media and state campaigns have long dominated the border spectacle, decentralised and unfiltered mobile digitalities now complicate this supremacy (Massari, 2025). The decentralised spectacle of workers facilitating border crossings is **constituted** through socio-cultural branding rooted in 'gangster' mythologies — including figures like Kazawi and prominent family names influential during the civil war — and through material engagements with symbols of European sovereignty and deterrence, such as fences and security personnel, alongside references to past political strongmen and contemporary figures from their places of origin. These are not only border workers in crews selling products; the political and social worlds they left behind are front and centre, explicitly or implicitly. Thus, 'the war on smuggling' becomes a war on messaging and imagery—it is not only the supremacy of legacy media or IOM information campaigns and EU neighbourhood externalisation (Nimkar and Mohammadi, 2023; Horwood, 2021; DeJong, 2017) human smugglers are affective producers of what it means to cross a border and live and labour along routes.

This dynamic also extends to the symbolic and cultural organisation of smuggling. Critical literature on smuggling has debunked some of the dominant myths placed on human smuggling and smugglers (Sanchez, 2017). The myth of smuggling being linked to transnational crime organisations are communicated by migrants themselves, and seemed to have been entangled in the politics of civil war and state breakdown in places of origin

were communicated along the route. For the Moroccan, Tunisian and Algerian the name Kazawi was synonymous with ‘mafia’, an organised group with a name that became folk law status with positive and negative connotations. Whether the ‘mafia boss’ exists or not, it plays into the dominant tropes of organised crime. This was further reinforced as ‘Little Syria’ in Sombor was known to be organised by a ‘powerful family’ that used the family code number 515 to indicate their affiliation and heritage. These numbers were plastered all over the social media of crews and was found in the squats where crews were active.

When the crews choose what to display in their videos, their images can be read ambivalently. On one hand, they reinforce the state’s “differential inclusion” (De Genova, 2013), serving as political capital for governments through spectacular imagery of “small boats” and cutting and jumping fences. On the other, they function as critical engagements with the residues of European imperialism (Walia, 2013). Taking Brotherton’s (2015) historical materialist perspective on culture allows a reading of these as cultural life emerging under extreme precarity. “Subterranean scripts” offer partial windows into otherwise distorted subjectivities produced by structural violence (De Genova, 2013). If scholars fail to engage critically with the phenomenon of “working crew,” their image will remain shaped entirely by state and dominant media narratives, recasting post-colonial subjects as inherently evil and shadowy figures. The spectacle thus comes full circle—the border worker, the “gang,” and the state co-produce one another in a ‘moral’ economy of representation and expedience. In this sense, human smuggling exists within an information competition in which all actors—state, media, and crews, draw on similar symbolic economies. Their mutual production of spectacle, crime, and sovereignty ultimately reinforce one another.

When it comes to the situated cultural performances of border workers in north Serbia and currently across the Balkan route are the counter-narratives of how these individuals and

crews develop alternative epistemic understanding as to how borders and routes are communicated. In the digital performances of border workers, subcultural texts are produced not merely for economic rationality but also to sustain emotional connection and control among those from similar geographies. The working crew build intra-communal emotion and outside conflict in the borderlands (Conquergood, 2013; 1994).

Subcultures are never vacuous they often speak to a socio-economic, legal and racialised category that is pathologized by corporate media and political elites. Digital texts and performances represent alternative epistemologies—subaltern ways of knowing and ways of performing sovereignty, as the state personnel were incorporated into the visual collage. Smuggling crews are a stigmatised subject in European ethno-nationalist and liberal political culture. These subjectivities of criminality are taken on in the videos, and crafted into their critical interventions. As Alexander (2010, in Brotherton 2015) argues, “stigma is never merely a psychological manoeuvre, it is a political act.” The working crews’ play on stigmatised identities through their cultural texts and the materialities of borders was their canvas and the digitalities provided a space and audience to perform. Lady Miro’s rap video, at the top of chapter five demonstrates the struggle in a cultural drama. For Aschraf boasting about his new trainers bought and paid for by his ‘mafia’ activity—a young man institutionalised by borders, squats, prisons, and detention—the video was a reference point for his ‘bordered ontology’, a counter-narrative crafted through his own material existence through reconfigured digitalities.

Young men like Aschraf have left a living documentation of life and labour at the borders. These digital worlds reflect both the excesses of the worker’s mobile commons and the violence of the state. Neither state-capital bordering practices nor ‘working crew’ conforms to the liberal ideals of European citizenship, or human rights. Instead, externalised bordering practices generate solidarities, spatialities, and materialities that nurture

resistant identities of non-conformity. Juskowiak and Moll (2022) in the edited book on “The Communes and other Mobile Commons”, point to a whole history of alternative groups and political formations slipping past the logic of ‘civil life’, they produce their own social and cultural worlds; undercommons, fugitives, and banditry—all rejecting Europe’s racial outsourcing. While even in these fugitive formations, the seduction of material wealth—money, clothes, power—remains potent. The rap video with Miro does not hide this. The intra-communal codes and performances depend on an external antagonist—the state and other crews—heightening the dramaturgy of conflict and re-confirming intra-communalism of the crews (Conquergood, 1994). The borderland thus becomes both stage and set, documenting a narrative of survival rather than pure resistance.

Border Activism at the Schengen Border

The poststructuralist turn in border studies means moving past classic approaches that viewed borders as naturalized and static territorial lines and to recognise them instead as dynamic socio-cultural and discursive processes and practices (Brambilla, 2015). As a result, border studies and migration studies are interwoven into social movements as humanitarianism intersects with activism not only at the border, but in multiple spatialities (della Porta and Steinhilper, 2021). At the heart of border activism lies its proposition to challenge state power, bordering regimes, and the limits of citizenship. Past literature on pro-migrant solidarity in Europe focuses on case studies of rights-claiming in sanctuary cities, grassroots civic engagement, and active citizen engagement in liberal democratic polities. For example, Fernandez-Bessa (2019) proposes four categories within the typology of *border activism*: migrant struggles, de facto citizen struggles, border protests, and institutional border activism. In each category, the language of rights-claiming and civil society engagement remains restricted to methodological nationalism.

Similarly, Ambrosini's (2023) notion of '*de-bordering solidarity*' attempts to collate the post-2015 literature on pro-migrant organising under one conceptual umbrella. The conceptual framing of border activism, remains limited to national civic engagement and has little applicability when placed within activism that engages with border socialities and politics in externalised contexts.

Previous anthropological activist-led studies along the Balkan route emphasise everyday solidarity and care as key to the ongoing survival and completion of mobility (Milan and Martini, 2024; Milan, 2018). Most empirical work on solidarity along the route has centred on 2015 and post-2015 "crisis" initiatives. Ten years on, the 'parallel systems of assistance' described by Stojic-Mitrović et al., (2020) have largely dissipated apart from a few No Border internationalist organisations (Campbell et al., 2025). The initial enthusiasm brought about by the spectacle of mass mobility in the political fervour of a European Refugee Crisis has waned, and the (in)visibility of people on the move as a consequence of the tightening of the route across the peninsular makes political solidarity in these contentious spaces challenging to say the least.

In this study, I have sought to link the genealogies of organisations to their ideology and practical method(s). Across the three organisations examined, all enacted a political sensibility originating from an internationalist praxis of solidarity, although two of the three did not explicitly come from an internationalist, anarcho-syndicalist praxis and political culture. What border activism achieves in third countries is an internationalist fervour not experienced in civil society citizen-led grassroots conceptualised in the work of Ambrosini (2023). Among No Borders activists, activism becomes a privately lived form of horizontalism, performed in sites where global bordering capital produces extreme racialised precarity and labour. While this enactment unfolds through a certain

detachment: activists are visitors whose engagement with Serbian and Bosnian political and social life often remains limited.

Theoretically the ‘no border’ tradition is underpinned by the dismantling of nation-state borders for a prefigurative future, all the while this ideal is undermined by the hierarchies that capture social relations at the borders. The spatial fix of capital—arising both from dispossession and from the capital of border security—overwhelms organisations’ intentions of creating spaces of social care from below (Trimiklioniotis and Tsianos, 2024). Social care from below has been equated with political spaces, argued by autonomist marxists as the ‘mobile commons’ in action, where prefigurative borderless futures can be imagined (Walters, 2006; Gauditz, 2017). Efforts to practice an anti-hierarchical political future, reassert the freedom to be mobile and a borderless world is what these projects are founded upon, rather the force of state-capital and sovereignty resembled what Bhattacharyya (2024, p.6) argues is how “capital extracts value across locations and organises us in ways that disrupt the possibility of solidarity.” The border regime sorts people along lines of class and race — at the borders, political solidarity is always at odds with the economics of transit processes that separate social relations at the border. Building on Kemp’s (2024) account of anti-deportation movements and their dystopian imaginaries, I argue that these imagined futures are not deferred but rather practiced in the present as coping mechanisms that enable activists to endure and resist overwhelming force of regimes of control (ie security and state capital). During field work, powerlessness is experienced by activists and people on the move, thus spaces for solidarity and mobile commons are limited and their radical potential blunted.

To stay ‘radical’ and principled to pre-figurative political ideals, No Border grassroots have to contend with siting outside the institutions while working in precarious contexts. For instance, by boycotting humanitarianism or ‘industrial complex’ and refusing to shape

projects to suit the taste of private donors means activism is carried out in precarious conditions and remains prone to entanglement in the border regime's criminalising logic — this is where the antagonism will always sit. The criminalisation of solidarity has largely been studied in the Mediterranean context, framed within state–activist relations during sea rescues. Along land routes, however, protracted immobility creates opportunities for solidarity that are built within precarious structures of capital relations. Empirical work on the criminalisation of activism remains limited in its relation to the political economies of bordering.

When it came to performance of activism at the *distro*, our power to take hold of distributions paled into comparison to the paternalist care of working crews and their social reproductive roles in the socialities they had created for themselves and their passengers. Without fetishising their power as low-level workers, in that moment, during the *distro* they held the final word. Activists resisted power dynamics as best as they could, without jeopardising the future of the project. Although all grassroots actors featured in this study shared a sensibility not to reproduce “pure victims” or play the white saviour, this was difficult to uphold.

Contrary to coloniality on our part, activists had to negotiate their position between crews and passengers for our work to not fall into the relative power crews had in those spaces, it was often the activists who felt undermined by the crews. Activists always tried their best not to be associated with the crew members in front of ‘passengers’. To mitigate this, activists reverted to ‘neutral’ humanitarian roles that went against the horizontal groups natural tendencies to centre social care from below into their prefigurative political culture. I want to reiterate here, the conditions along the route became based on commodity relations and services instilling distrust between activists, crews and passengers. Although, the utopian prefigurative politics is met with feelings of

powerlessness in shaping utopian projects that stem from the impenetrable merging of state and economic forces in exploitative fashion, as an activist, one becomes a spectator in this border performance.

Humanitarian-led solidarity research has often questioned whether the micro-practices of grassroots organisations reproduce postcolonial governance. This has been treated in the literature as a situated dilemma for citizens involved in mobilising grassroots action to welcome and integrate migrants. Braun (2017) captures this tension well in her critique of German bourgeois culture, which reproduced colonial charity during Germany's "welcome culture" of the refugee "crisis." For activists in Serbia and Bosnia efforts to decolonise practice often remained internal to the activists organising. In the field, such reflections were considered, but we did not have a monopoly of control as we were always the visitors entering a different dynamic.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the ethnographic study focusing on the everyday labour of borderwork along the routes to EUrope, applying a political economy framework can arguably lead to structural reductionism. Political economy frameworks that explain macro-structural explanations to the messy world of mobility can potentially take away the negotiation and interpretation of those research participants implicated in social, material and digital realities. I attempt to ground the political economy of labour markets and relative surplus populations with concepts such as affective labour, body power and social capital to ground the historical moment in the material. By presenting border workers, as labour is not to take away their agency it is an approach that explains the global as well as the local. border workers are the result of dispossession and imperial conquests, the historical structural forces cannot deny the over representation of these men. While their historical backgrounds partly explain the

political economy of racialised labour, bordering can be analysed as a continuation of those structural inequalities. The work patterns many of us enjoy are diminished for vast segments of the global populations that defer to their mobility to survive. To put this down to personal agency alone in such strenuous circumstances denies the border worker's own differentiated position in Europe's bordering and citizenship logic, as well as the economics. Moreover by zooming in on the different laborious skillsets of the border work, situates their negotiation in these socialities and economies in a set of precarious circumstance not out of their own making.

While criticism of structural reductionism only explains border work as purely a base level economic relation in a proverbial factory of bordering, this was partially countered through bringing to the foreground the digitalities of the worker's own cultural performances on social media. This being said, the visual ethnography is limited in its narrative from the filmmakers themselves. Despite interviews from migrants whom interacted with some of the content, especially videos aimed at prospective business, and the physical ethnography being able to triangulate what was being narrated in videos, the study would have benefited from interviews with the groups creating the content. While verbal narration of content would have been a welcomed addition to the study, when drawing from cultural performance studies, emphasis on non-verbal communications, especially in this instance as all the videos were accompanied by sound tracks, often speaks louder than words. The performance incorporates explicit critical engagement in the materialities of borders and were accompanied by narratives from long term activists whom got to know young crew members better than myself.

I am aware my own positionality to present digital frames of border workers is a risky endeavour as it could be a 'going native' moment and speaking on behalf of the voiceless.

Although I felt to write about 'border work' as purely a structural, economic, rational world risked losing the social and cultural scripts in which this commune of border workers were shaping from their own precarious materialities. The emotional worlds that border regimes and socialities produce along them is something that has had less attention in migration and border studies. I am reminded of Aryan's frustrations with the young men that lost their lives because of the carnage of smuggling prestige in the economies of transit. Their stories can be told not as initials, date of birth and nationality in the police bulletins in local newspapers, but as protagonists in their own voice and performance. This is all replayed in the neo-colonial spaces and infrastructures that reflect European chauvinism in the 21st century.

Border activism is a gendered experience. The male dominated spaces we entered was something female activist-volunteers were far more reflexive when it came to interactions during the distributions. The majority of the gender balance in teams I participated identified as a woman. The study does put onus on the masculinities of the border environment for young males, but has not given space to the very real challenges women face in not only in the worker controlled spaces (squats and encampments) but the male activists they worked alongside. Although addressed only briefly, one account from a female activist illustrates how her perceived femininity shaped social interactions, such that male workers did not interpret her close proximity to their tight-knit community as threatening.

A gendered lens is essential to understanding how activists experienced everyday interactions in the borderlands. At times border workers were friendly, sometimes arrogant and intimidating towards activists. During fieldwork women experienced moments at 'the distribution' in particular ways in which I could not have experienced, nor

my male comrades. The study would have benefitted from specific lines of questioning of the activist's gender, especially in the sections on the performance of 'the distro'. As a white, male researcher, my ontological security comes with a precondition that has probably faced far less levels of sexual misconduct and and far less frequency of misconduct and outright abuse than my female comrades.

I propose for future research to carry on in exploring the everyday social relations that goes into sustaining transit economies within the framework of 'Racial capitalism'. I argue it is a useful frame to locate the categories of certain types of labour which are otherwise 'criminalised' and 'moralised' by the dominant political culture as symptoms of the broader inequities facing people in racial capitalist logics today. 'Racial Capitalism' can point to economic shifts in the global economy in which surplus populations are always at the sharp end of its exploitation and readjustment. Thus new surpluses created from social differentiation, tells another story of the history of capital through the labour intensive worlds of the parallel economy and its social reproductive role in 'strange' peripheries like border lands.

Equally, there should be a sharper focus on the 'dark money' fuelling securitisation governance and practice. But more interestingly how this securitisation capital, knowledge and expertise entangles with the everyday material conditions of labour that works through this state-security nexus and the lengths to which people are prepared to pay to evade its surveillance. I revert back to Horwood's (2021, p.68) claim that government policy approaches human smuggling on a war footing, rather than a global issue of "displacement"¹²⁵. Much like the drug cartels in a recent historical juncture: 'we can expect [the war on human smuggling] to be elaborated with new strategies and tactics in the

¹²⁵ the precursor being dispossession, war and imperialism

coming years and irregular migration is likely to increase as the ‘unfinished business of globalization’ and in response to pressing global inequalities” (Horwood, *ibid*). Treating mobility in this way will always be a politicised one, mixing migration and crime is a self-fulfilling prophecy of the state, thus requiring sophisticated labour and higher levels of capital into the parallel ‘transit economies’. The stakes for human life will be raised and nefarious interest increased further— the parallel economies, the ‘dark underbelly’ of capitalist production comes in line with the illegality industry — fuelled by greater inequities and casualisation of labour markets and erosion of rights (Rajaram, 2018).

Moreover there is also scope for future research in the politicisation and mediatisation of smuggling crews. Recent talks between the UK’s foreign office and western Balkan state continues to treat this part of Europe as a neo-colonial exercise in policing Europe and its own national borders to the UK¹²⁶. The naming and shaming of Working Crew ‘gangsters’ in policy briefs undoubtedly shared from Serbian ‘intelligence’ gathered in the 2022-2023 period, brings into sharp focus the productivity of working crews as useful figures for the state to signal to publics that they are tackling ‘the new’ existential security threat — the ‘smuggling gangs’ with increased policing budgets. Thus research on the cultural and political production of the ‘gang’ is novel to border and migration studies in Europe¹²⁷, and future research needs to keep a critical eye on the lived experiences of smuggling and smuggling labour, their media representation and how this is re-produced in the nation state’s narrative and policy. It is up to researcher’s and their participants to offer another framing of the debate that does not fall into lazy racialised tropes.

¹²⁶ <https://borderviolence.eu/blog/no-rwanda-no-problem-how-the-uk-is-outsourcing-its-deportation-centres-to-the-balkans>

¹²⁷ Notable book from DeLeon (2024) titled ‘Soldiers and Kings: Survival and Hope in the World of Human Smuggling’

At the practical level, for future research engaging with youth border cultures could benefit from radical social work practices from below (Trimikliniotis and Tsianos, 2024), especially if activists want to better understand the social and cultural divides that are often present in the borderlands. Such an understanding can equip researchers, activists, and border workers with tools to construct non-criminogenic narratives and theoretical positions, producing knowledge grounded in biographical accounts that counter the misrepresentation of less vocal subjects deemed too ‘dangerous’ to mention.

For activism at the borders, research-led methods has a future in empirically uncovering situated conditions in which direct action is practiced. Criminalisation is approached from the perspective of activists being criminalised by the state whereas in the case of the Balkan route, it was a different case. Instead of being criminalised, activists found themselves surrounded by a criminalised system of state corruption. There needs to be further research in re-framing of activism in these contexts and how critical criminologists and activism can develop practical tools for activists to be equipped when found implicated in this novel intersection. Many activist relayed to me how unprepared they were before entering the borderlands along the route — thus more work with researchers, practitioners activists can be done in this area.

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