

The floating karst flow of migrants as a rite of passage through the Eastern European border

Roberta Altin 

University Trieste, Italy

ABSTRACT

Since the so-called ‘migrant crisis’ in 2015, the Balkan route has resumed its old function as an overland passage from Eastern to Central Europe and the area between Italy and Slovenia has constituted a migratory crossroads towards Northern Europe. In the last two years, there has been a constant increase of rejection policies in Italy and in the Western Balkans that has forced asylum seekers on undercover paths, with stops, blocks, rejections and many attempts to overcome the militarized borders. The article reports the consequences of the new migration policies on the Balkan route toward Italy, with a particular focus on the exclusion and the resistance of migrants that, like karst waters, are changing trajectories and tactics along the road. The Balkans constitute a liminal area where the process of ‘bordering’ is played both by migrants and by European policies. Through the concept of ‘tidemark’ the underground flow of migrants is interpreted as a typical rite of passage with suspended temporality and reflux mobility where the Balkans constitute a ‘waiting room’ and a liminal transit area with a ‘waiting game’ toward Central Europe.

RIASSUNTO

Dalla cosiddetta ‘crisi migratoria’ nel 2015, la rotta balcanica ha ripreso la sua vecchia funzione di passaggio via terra dall’Est al Centro Europa, con la zona tra Italia e Slovenia che funge da crocevia migratorio verso il Nord Europa. Negli ultimi due anni si è verificato un costante aumento delle politiche di respingimento in Italia e nei Balcani occidentali che hanno costretto i richiedenti asilo a percorsi sotterranei con fermi, blocchi, respingimenti e plurimi tentativi di superare i confini militarizzati. L’articolo riporta le conseguenze delle recenti politiche migratorie nella rotta balcanica verso Italia, con un focus particolare sull’esclusione e la resistenza dei migranti che, come le acque carsiche, cambiano traiettorie e tattiche lungo il percorso. I Balcani costituiscono un’area liminale in cui il processo di bordering viene costruito sia dai migranti che dalle politiche europee. Attraverso il concetto di tidemark il flusso sotterraneo dei migranti viene interpretato come un tipico rito di passaggio dalla temporalità sospesa e con mobilità di riflusso, dove i Balcani costituiscono una ‘sala d’attesa’ e una zona di transito liminale verso l’Europa centrale che si gioca attraverso l’attesa.

KEYWORDS Asylum seekers; European border; Balkan route; rite of passage; liminality

PAROLE CHIAVE Richiedenti asilo; confini europei; rotta balcanica; rito di passaggio; liminalità

This article is based on observation on the Italian–Slovenian border, conducted since the beginning of the so-called migratory ‘crisis’ in 2015 and the opening of the Balkan route. Data and information have been collected through interviews and participant observation with the migrants hosted in the first reception centres of Trieste and Gorizia (according to the Legislative Decree 142/2015) and among the informal networks of assistance¹ organized by NGOs and voluntaries. After the first year, the stories reported by asylum seekers about the overland journey have become less linear and full of rejections, zigzag routes, long waits, more risks and violence. I have tried to analyse these migratory paths with a multi-scalar approach (Çaglar and Glick Schiller 2018), in dialogue with the most recent scientific literature regarding the Balkan route (Bužinkić and Hameršak 2017; Kallius, Monterescu and Rajaram 2016; Lange, Nechev and Trauner 2017; El-Shaarawi and Razsa 2019; Minca, Santic and Umek 2018) and with some mainstream texts of social anthropology, such as Victor Turner (1969).

In this article I try to adopt the perspective of the migrants (Fontanari 2019), and I suggest to interpret this passage through the Balkan corridor as a rite of passage for young male migrants in search of a better, new and unknown phase of their lives (Vacchiano 2014).

Since 2014, the area between Italy and Slovenia has constituted a migratory crossroads towards North Europe through the Balkans; despite the closure of European borders after the EU pact with Turkey, many asylum seekers have continued to use this corridor in an attempt to travel overland to central Europe. The route has changed frequently due to the complexity of the geopolitical situation and the need to use irregular passages, often uncertain and risky. 2015 was the year in which generally not easily foreseeable migratory waves intensified, due to the search for asylum and protection by foreigners fleeing conflict and persecution; in Friuli Venezia Giulia requests for humanitarian aid have persisted also in the last three years (2017–2020) and lately, in fact, have been on the rise. Most asylum seekers (92.7 per cent of the total) have come autonomously by land along the so-called ‘Balkan route’ and are mainly Afghan and Pakistani men, while there may be some overlapping in their characteristics with respect to migrants for work reasons and for family reunifications. The gender ratio of these asylum seekers is particularly unbalanced: in 97 per cent of cases they are men and in 74 per cent of cases unmarried men of a very young age: eight out of ten applicants are under 30 years old.

I propose to analyse the Balkan route as a process of European bordering through the concept of ‘tidemark’ (Green 2011). I find this concept very useful in the interpretation of the ‘karst’ flow of asylum seekers who are constantly changing their visibility in close relation to the new migration policies (Ballinger 2016). The idea of a tidemark helps to understand the role of the Balkans both as a ‘waiting room’ and transit area for migrants heading toward

Central Europe and, at the same time, in the process of re-definition of the European borders. In spatial-temporal and existential terms, the Balkan route is configured as a border-building process that involves both migrants and Europeans, and their reciprocal categorization, relationship and political power (Tazzioli 2019)².

In addition, it helps us to take into account temporal overlaps and entanglements with the previous migrations and displacements. As researchers, our challenge is to adopt a critical approach of methodological nationalism and of the dichotomy 'migrant/autochthonous', focussing on 'the migration experience with its multiple forms of displacement as well as barriers to and modes of emplacement' (Çaglar and Glick Schiller 2018, 5).

The lower academic and media focus on this European border, compared to the maritime border of Southern Italy, is linked probably to the fact that this border constitutes a much more hybrid zone in territorial and geopolitical terms and in terms of European identity and belonging (De Genova 2017). The Balkans are largely composed of so-called 'third' countries not included in the Schengen area, and the logic applied to/by the migrants in this transit area is that of a grey zone that coincides neither with the humanitarianism of universal human rights founded on the Geneva Convention (1951) nor with the state of abandonment and rejection on the margins.

Route, not crisis

The so called 'migration crisis' started after the Arab springs, with an increase in the arrivals from 2014 until 2016 (Collyer and King 2016). In the winter of 2015/2016, the Balkan corridor was opened and it was literally filled with a river of people escaping from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan and other countries from the East and South of the world. After the long exodus of 2015 (888,537 migrants) and the first months of 2016 (194,093 arrivals), the migratory flow seemed to have stopped as a consequence of the pact signed with Turkey in order to 'contain' asylum seekers and refugees outside the European perimeter, following the trend of border externalization (De Genova 2017).

However, IOM (2019) reported a multiple increase in the last three years in registered arrivals overland via the Balkans. Unlike in 2015 and 2016, when routes were controlled and directed by the authorities through an established intra-regional humanitarian corridor, information collected from IOM field data collectors and mobile teams shows that migrants registered in 2017 and 2018 have been taking more diverse routes for travelling in the Balkan region. While in 2016 Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and the Republic of North Macedonia registered 95 per cent of the migrants, in 2018 Bosnia and

Herzegovina became the leading place among the Balkan countries (with 80 per cent of caseloads), with a noteworthy increase also in Albania and Montenegro, two countries that were not involved in the migratory flows in 2016. Additionally, in both 2017 and 2018, an increase in arrivals was observed in Slovenia, Croatia and Italy, especially after the militarization of the border between Italy and Slovenia³.

The authorities in the Western Balkan countries registered more than 61,000 irregular migrants between January and December 2018 (five times more than the previous year), with a constant and significant increase especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina (23,848 migrants and refugees – twenty times more than the 1,116 reported in 2017) (IOM 2019); only a small number chose the route via Bulgaria and Romania. The countries of origin of the asylum seekers are mostly Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan and Syria, with different sub routes taken by different nationalities: Pakistanis are prevalent in Serbia, Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, while more than a half of migrants in Macedonia are Iranians and in Croatia Afghans are the predominant nationality. Another feature of this migration process is the high intra-regional mobility (Figure 1). Similar to karst waters, many refugees stay submerged



Figure 1. The game (Trieste, 24.08.2020).

until they can resurface where the terrain is more yielding, changing trajectories and tactics along the road (Queirolo Palmas and Rahola 2020).

The scenario seems very similar to this board game played by a migrant and used as a metaphor to describe the process during an interview: 'If the snake bites you have to go back down and try again. The asylum process is exactly like the game played' (A. 2.9.2020). Indeed, thousands of refugees who are trying to reach Europe in order to seek asylum facing considerable dangers, violence and abuse (Belgrade Centre for Human Rights et al. 2017; Médecins Sans Frontières 2017) and are rejected by the Croatian, Slovenian and lately by Italian police. They are denied access to the asylum procedures and they are usually pushed back to marginal and temporary living conditions in countries such as Serbia and Bosnia, being neither able to go ahead nor to return home (Sardelic, cited in Tsianos, Hess and Karakayali 2009, 101–103).

Since there is no legal and safe transit, migrants and refugees attempt to cross the borders irregularly they talk about 'the game' when they try to cross the border area. At least 136 migrants died along this land transit, as reported by UNHCR (2018) and IEMed (2019), and racist violence, also among the police, is on the rise (Bieber 2020).

The concept of migratory crisis underlies the emergency and the extraordinary, but these arrivals are not only the result of local conflicts and wars, these people knocking on Europe's door are 'displaying their moral fatigue at the growing gap between the richest and poorest segments of humanity. They are actors in the realm of politics, revealing through their itinerancy the extend to which our global order is immoral' (Monsutti 2021, 101).

Waiting time

Most of the analysis of migratory flows in the Balkans focuses on the problem of space mobility, borders and barriers erected on the edges of Europe (Bužinkić and Hameršak 2017; Kallius et al. 2016); much less attention is given to the temporal factor and the entanglement with the resistance or resilience of the migrants (Green 2013; Donnan, Hurd and Leutloff-Grandits 2017). Obviously, the issue is not to analyse only one of the Cartesian space/time axes, but rather to introduce a different gaze to the geopolitical map in order to consider that 'transnational policy flows are never linear transfers from one place to another, but involve *multiscalar networks* that organize space in ways that enable – and constrain – the movement of policy' (Clark et al. 2015, 23; Tazzioli 2019).

Observing the processes in place we could define the Balkan corridors for refugees as social fields with overlapping and intersecting networks in which actors (refugees, volunteers, local residents, police, etc.) and institutions put in place emplacing and displacing practices locally situated, with simultaneous extension nationally, transnationally, or supra-nationally, as in the case

of the EU, or global (Çaglar and Glick Schiller 2018, 8–9). This approach allows to consider not only the connection to the places of origin, transit and landing or temporary anchorage of migrants, but also to the complex stratification of historical boundaries, new nationalisms and/or hybrid senses of belonging, as well as positioning tactics and strategies of power (Ballinger 2016; Mezzadra and Nielson 2013).

Considering time and waiting time as a process of 'bordering' Europe means to evaluate that, while refugees are necessarily mobile, their mobility is inconstant and interrupted by long periods of stasis, waiting or impediment to them moving freely (Wyss 2019). Thus, in fact, despite being 'forced' migrants, much of their time 'on the move' through the Balkans is spent waiting (Jefferson, Turner and Jensenc 2019). Most of the migrants asking for asylum or protection in Italy declared an average of one to two years spent entering Europe via the Balkans. There is no typical itinerary, even when a more travelled track is created, 'as they go along' (Queirolo Palmas and Rahola 2020, 97, 107); it must often become less visible and invasive, especially in relations with local residents and law enforcement.

The first reason for taking such a long time in transit is that migrants have to rely on intermediaries or smugglers to cross the several borders; the second is that the varying policies of closing/opening borders are based on fluctuations in internal and external European policy, among the national states and the third countries. Following the fluctuation in public opinion and in media representation, which can reinforce or deconstruct the process of 'othering and bordering' (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2002), there is an evident negotiation strategy with Europe carried out by some third countries, such as Serbia (Minca et al. 2018), to use the transit of migrants as an instrument of pressure through 'stop and go' directives, similar to repeated hiccups. If, so far, the waiting time has been seen only as a form of forced parking that prevents migrant mobility, I would instead like to underline too the other side of the coin, and consider the fact that this temporal suspension underlines the liminality and suspension of the rules and of the identification of the migrant as a subject (De Genova, Garelli and Tazzioli 2018; Jackson 2008).

The majority of migrants (almost 80 per cent) on the Balkan route are young men or unaccompanied minors who have left Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq or Syria with the aim of reaching Europe. They need to arrive in order to find economic benefit not only for themselves, with

a new life, but also for their family of origin. Sometimes they have to join relatives or friends in Central or Northern Europe. In any case the waiting times, often long and indefinite, begin already before departure, when the project takes shape and becomes the existential objective for the migrant, not only as an individual, but as a complex network of contacts. As Eriksen well remarks:

... with refugees, their waiting represents a tacit acceptance of the fact that *scarcity of time is a scarce resource*. They have left everything behind and have nothing left, not even the right to a full agenda. Their time is abundant and empty. ... Life is placed on hold. While waiting, they imagine a future which may be as bright as it is uncertain, a directed and cumulative form of temporality, quite the opposite of their present situation. (2016, 79; Wysz 2019)

If this status of migrants might seem completely passive, in the meantime they are often creating their own 'parallel societies', relying on informal work and connections, irrelevant in the eyes of the state, but not in their own communities and projects.

Europe adopted the third-countries' policies as waiting rooms for immigration policy, but, as demonstrated Könönen (2019, 1) in Finland, waiting in migration 'needs to be understood as a relational concept that involves different objects and expectations'. Even passivity and waiting time can function as a strategy of resistance: the metaphor used by migrant to describe the border struggle is 'play the game', as well as even migrants detained in Finland use to talk about 'the waiting game' to describe 'a struggle in which they too are active participants, considering their options and becoming involved in negotiations with immigration authorities' (Könönen 2019, 3). Contrary to neoliberal dogma, empty time is not always in vain.

The game as a rite of passage

Migration as a rite of passage is confirmed by the anthropological literature (Monsutti 2007; Bourdieu 1982; Vacchiano 2014), as well as by the stories on 'going game', in the words of refugees stranded between borders on the Balkan route (Belgrade Centre for Human Rights et al. 2017)

Trying to find protection in Europe is conceived as a school of life, where only the fittest will succeed. The difficult and potentially traumatic journey becomes a kind of rite of passage to manhood, enabling young Afghans to demonstrate their masculinity and become adults. (Scalettaris, Monsutti and Donini 2019, 8)

The game for these young men means learning to wait for a loophole walking in the woods and finding the right moment to cross the armed border hidden under a truck or in a railway compartment: 'I crossed ten

countries, days without eating and without drinking. Croatian police beat me, even the Iranian police. The trip lasted 1 year. On foot, by car' (B. September 2020).

During her field work in Lesvos, Tsoni (2016, 39) reported that for the refugees stranded in between, 'meanings, identities, trajectories and prospects remained in constant flux and yet impinged on very specific localities'. As in traditional rites of passage, the young migrants are waiting in marginal areas, in no-man's-land, often confined in makeshift camps in the many 'jungles' scattered in the woods, which also represent the wild and 'uncivilized' place, out of social order and control.

In this 'game' many aspects coincide with the main points of the classical analysis of rites of passage by Victor Turner (1969):

- the liminality in terms of space between the border to cross and suspended time, in a kind of waiting room for Europe (Horvath, Thomassen and Wydra 2015);
- the risk, dangerous feat of the game and the high social pressure to pass over;
- the creation of a *communitas*, with networks of solidarity and reciprocity, based on a system of values and solidarity, norms and social obligations;
- the need to go beyond the limit to become an adult, successful migrants and therefore 'good men' for their relatives who stayed behind (Scalettaris et al. 2019, 13).

Turner describes the liminal person ('threshold people') as necessarily ambiguous, since the conditions of liminality 'elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space' (Turner 1969, 359). This interpretative approach seems to perfectly reflect the double liminality and threshold condition of these migrants: as an asylum seeker without political protection during the transit, very ambiguous and, therefore, dangerous; and, secondly, as a young person not yet fully 'adult' with a recognized role and social functions.

Another typical condition of liminality is the long wait in no man's land:

Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are *betwixt and between* the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. (Turner 1969, 359)

The refugees among Balkans, like all the neophytes in the liminal phase, 'fall in the interstices of the social structure, are in its margins, or occupy its lowest rungs' (Turner 1969, 371; Mubi Brighenti 2013). They are not only trapped in space but also stuck in time, in a suspended freezing life, waiting for a distant future (Donnan et al. 2017, 27).

This condition of marginality, anti-structure and ambiguity allows however the creation of the *communitas*, in the meaning of a relationship between real, historical and particular individuals. These individuals are not divided into roles and social status because they are in the anti-structure, floating in the same existential condition, in a phase of transit and ambiguous passage (Bourdieu 1982). 'The *communitas* is made evident or accessible only through its juxtaposition to, or hybridization with, aspects of social structure' (Turner 1969, 372).

Communitas refers to an unstructured state in which all members are equal allowing them to share a common experience, usually through a rite of passage, and is characteristic of people experiencing liminality together. The social relationship of common living has an existential quality; it involves both a sense of precariousness and fragility and an aspect of potentiality and resilience (Sardelic 2017)

I was travelling with my brothers but we got separated in the journey. The eldest who is 18 is in Germany, the other one who is 16 is in Austria. I don't know how to get to them and I don't want them to get in trouble so I don't know what to do. They say I can't go legally, so I try 'The Game'. (12-year-old boy from Afghanistan [MSF 2017, 5])

During 2017, with the Balkan route supposedly closed, 78 asylum seekers died in the journey from the Turkish shores to the Serbian, Croatian and Hungarian borders, mostly due to drowning (thirty-eight) and car accidents (twelve), but a significant number died of hypothermia (seven) and suicide (four). Beyond these 78 stories, it is unknown how many people lost their lives crossing the Balkans, but it is clear that the most vulnerable take the greatest risks (MSF 2017, 13).

'Playing the game' is a dangerous task, not only because the police have become more violent on the European borders, trampling human rights of the Geneva Convention (1951), but also because it is a fundamental part of the familiar investment, both moral and economic. The game is important as a rite of passage and as a journey 'redemptive for the whole family . . . as an example of success' (Scalettaris et al. 2019, 8). The suspension of space and time is also a liminal passage between home and Europe, a kind of timeless limbo in no man's land.

The liminality of *communitas* creates mutual support between migrants, not only countrymen. It involves volunteers, activists and often also local residents, especially in Bosnia and Serbia, where recent memory of other displaced people has remained (El-Shaarawi and Razsa 2019). This creates a chain of solidarity in real

time and in local spaces, which translates into the supply of food, clothing, care and, on the Internet, defence with reports in real time of abuse and violence. For example, 'Border Violence Monitoring', a civil society watchdog organization, published photos and videos which it claimed were evidence of illegal pushbacks along Croatia's border with Bosnia and Herzegovina; other NGOs or volunteers use their online network to denounce violence and to support the refugees in transit (Border Violence Monitoring Report 2021; Rivolti ai Balcani 2021).¹ As stated by a volunteer who cares for migrants arriving in Trieste from the Balkan route.

We started in 2018 and we immediately realized that we are faced with a migration different from the one we were used to. They no longer arrive, only people looking for work, but also fleeing from wars and impossible living conditions. Many of them bear on the body the signs of the violence suffered by the border police. (G.F, 28.03.2021)

This game involves various social actors in the broader scenario: the neophytes with anti-structural *communitas*, but also the EU, with its social structure that orders and divides, using the Balkan space as a 'waiting room' before entering the Schengen area. Indeed, we must bear in mind that six Western Balkan states involved in the Balkan routes (namely, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia) are non-EU countries.

The regional 'newcomers' in the EU family, Slovenia and Croatia, are constantly using the refugees flow as a tool for interaction and negotiation with the Western Balkans, supported by Austria, France, Italy and the EU (Flessenkemper, cited in Lange et al. 2017, 23). This confirms the ambiguity of European policies towards asylum seekers, who are 'entrusted' or better 'kept on hold' by third countries, defined as safe (such as Libya, Turkey, Serbia, etc.), with the EU tolerating violence and abuse in the transit area across European borders. Moreover, this ambiguity and violence confirm the liminality of this area, especially in the dynamics of defining European citizenship and belonging.

The Balkans are an iconic example in the contemporary Western imagination where border area is a seeming lack of distinction, but in a distinctly 'Balkan' way (Todorova 1997). Even Ballinger's research (2004), which is more oriented toward a historical approach, confirms such a view of the Balkans as hybrid spaces, frozen in a state of precariousness and chronic liminality. The question cannot simply be reduced to an East-West dichotomy, with projections of 'nesting orientalism' (Bakic-Hayden 1995), it became an issue of reconfiguration and displacement, considering the Balkans 'a key axis of division and differentiation *within* both Europe's putative *East*s and *West*s' (Ballinger 2016, 45). The bordering process acquires a new role, both in political and analytical terms, but it is important to recover the concept of the 'tidemark' (Green 2011) in order to explain the multiplicity of overlapping and cross cutting border regimes, never reducible to an indexical line. If we consider borders 'as an ongoing project, an activity and

a process, rather than an entity or object' (Green 2013, 350), then the crossing of the Balkans by young refugees has implications on their migratory project during the liminal phase, but also on the construction of identity classifications for both new and old European citizens, with a re-arrangement of the relations between the EU and elsewhere, especially in the peripheries.

European eastern border

The Balkan corridor, like a long tunnel, ends very often on the Italian border, in the area once delimited by the Iron Curtain, separating Western Europe from the socialist countries. Since 2004, the year of Slovenia's entry into the EU, this cross-border area has seen the border check points lose their bars and fenced wire and the disappearance of the 'Communist Slavic' enemy, dissolved into the European community itself (Figure 2).

Meanwhile, a new 'otherness' has been constantly crossing the border: Afghans, Pakistanis, as well as some Africans, thanks to the smugglers, easily found their way through the woods and the karst hills: 'I slept in the woods, two three days without eating and drinking. Foot problems after so much walking. Problems with the police. I arrived in Trieste' (D. October 2020).

Until 2018, this flow of migrants was constant and fluid; a fairly radical change was introduced with the 'Security Decree' promoted by Mr. Salvini, then the Italian Minister of the Interior. The new approach 'almost completely abolishes "humanitarian protection"; it excludes asylum seekers from the SPRAR; it sharply reduces the services provided by the CAS² and transfers European funds intended for integration policies to deportation policies'



Figure 2. The cross-border area between Slovenia-Italy (San Dorligo della Valle, 8.04.2019).

(Ambrosini 2019, 169). The Security Decree dramatically reduces the economic and structural resources for first and second reception and introduces border rejection policies. Slovenia has also agreed to collaborate with the Italian military forces to check the border area, the former Iron Curtain; Hungary, Croatia and Slovenia are examples where the rejection of migrants does not respect the European law (Amnesty International 2018).

The militarization has 'filtered' migrants and paradoxically has increased at first the number of entrances through the Eastern European border. In fact, the military has intercepted more refugees and has been forced to proceed with the biometric control required by E.U.R.O.D.A.C. and, consequently, with the first reception of migrants. In 2019 immigration data provided by the Trieste police chief, record 50 per cent more traces in the territory compared with 2018: about 4,000 people to whom have been added another 1,300 who presented themselves spontaneously at the police headquarters to apply for asylum (Figure 3).

Obviously the tightening of the border made the irregular flows increase and not decrease; indeed the Croatian Ministry of the Interior has announced that in 2018 law enforcement officers arrested a total of around 600 smugglers which compared to 2017 represents a 100 per cent increase. Local media in Trieste steadily report groups of migrants stopped by Italian military during the crossing border from Slovenia, generally in the woods of the karst.

The Italian–Slovenian border has been constantly used by 'irregular' migrants as an eastern gate to get to Europe, but the management of the border has been changed after the Arab springs and the 'official' closure of the Balkan route in 2016. This has created a dichotomous regime: either humanitarian treatment or *refoulment* beyond European borders with the



Figure 3. Clothes and objects abandoned by migrants at the border (San Dorligo della Valle, 8.04.2019).

consequences that the migrants are constantly in transit without rights and, at the same time, the prevention of any kind of more mediated and negotiated interaction with them, who are increasingly perceived as foreign bodies to confine or to reject to the margins (Khosravi 2010).

Observing both the rough reaction of the police and the resistance of the migrants, the asylum seekers are maintaining irregular, self-managed make-shift camps, in order not to end up in the dichotomous perspective of the 'humanitarian' field with biometric identification or expulsion (Fontanari 2019). They want to pass over, but in the meantime 'by revealing its bordered contours, these migrant diagnostics make Europe as such tangible, also those characteristics that are often rendered not of Europe in its dominant presentation to the world' (Stierl 2019, 3).

Tidemarks of floating karstic flow

The concept of 'liminality' has been used in order to explain the transit as a rite of passage for refugees, during 'the game' to cross over the border, and for the process of 'bordering-othering' involving European identity and citizenship (Ammaturo 2019). Nevertheless, in the complexity of the process, 'the Western Balkans *route itself* became part of the humanitarian border, involving fluctuating practices of care and control and shaping forcefully people's experiences of refugeness as the basis of their transformative agencies' (Kallio, Häkli and Pascucci 2019, 15).

Following the recent topological approach to the border (Green 2019), the fluctuating spatial relations and separations on the Balkan frontiers make temporal logics emerge. The porosity of the border and the decelerated circulation across states, means that migrations are regulated more through time than space (Tsianos et al. 2009, 8). The relative porosity and temporary 'stuckness' (Jefferson et al. 2019) turns the Balkan passage into a waiting room and decompression chamber. The liminality produces ambiguous positions and determines contradictory spaces: on the one hand the 'bordering' maintains order and divides, removing impurity or the visibility of refugees' bodies (Turner 2015, 144). On the other hand, the temporality and waiting time in the liminal phase create new possibilities of encounter (*communitas*) and new beginnings, or hope (Jovanovic 2018, 256; Jackson 2008). The Balkan corridors reflect through the nodes of mobility/immobility the fragmentation of former Yugoslavia with a range of hierarchical relationships to European integration and the splintering of local populations (El-Shaarawi and Razsa 2019, 95).

The arrival of COVID-19 pandemic led to the immediate block of cross-border for residents and an even tighter military garrison. Until 2020 there were about 1,000–1,200 arrivals per year per year on the land border of Trieste but with the lockdown has been reactivated a cross-border agreement signed between Italy and Slovenia in 1996: this convention establishes that

anyone within 5 km of the border could be expelled in a few hours without the possibility of applying for asylum and therefore without leaving any trace of their presence. This completely illegal procedures, never approved by the national government, allowed the army and border police to reject about 5,000 migrants in ten months of 2020 (data from the Prefecture of Trieste). These procedures were challenged by appeal and the court of Rome on 18 January 2021 sanctioned the illegality of these readmission procedures, especially due to the violent situation documented in Croatia, but the push-backs have not stopped.

Chain rejections start from the Italian border of Trieste-Gorizia³ to arrive in Bosnia (Altin 2019). Slovenia operates the same way, pushing them back to Croatia, which in turn sends them back to Bosnia, in a reverse back path. There are asylum seekers who, when they finally apply to the commission, claim that they have tried 'the game' between six and nine times along the Balkan route to enter Europe.

In addition to violating the principle of *non-refoulement*, this form of rejection is particularly violent because everyone is now aware of what happens on the Croatian border: mass pushbacks, beating with batons, theft of money and destruction of cell phones to disperse the contacts of migrants, even if they are minors.

They put so many of us in a car. My arm hurt. I even fell walking. When I entered Croatia the police beat us with sticks and kicks on the back. I took a few shots and then I managed to escape. (MNA, September 2020)

In Bosnia the IOM has closed the official camps and therefore remain only 'jungle' and camps in situations impossible to sustain, in serious precariousness for both migrants and volunteers. Velika Kladusha is the Bosnian Canton most interested because it is located on the border with Croatia and is only 250 km from Italy.

In summary, the pandemic gave the opportunity to reinforce the borders with the reopening of old checkpoints on the border and the installation of containers to host migrants in the Slovenian area in order to apply new 'informal' chain rejection methods, violating all principles in defence of human rights and criminalizing NGOs and voluntary associations. The system of reception and hospitality in this border area is almost in total immobility, because people are kept in a kind of limbo for too long. Waiting times of over one or two years for the hearing are increasing the clandestine and extreme precariousness of the situation. If we consider the rite of passage from the point of view of migrants, this process attests the crucial existential role of movement and stasis in the migratory project, that is not only individual since it often involves the family group, at home or in the diaspora (Tosic and Lems 2019, 6).

The widespread rhetoric of 'refugee crisis' exposes the Balkan route and the passage to Europe of a normalization of the emergency, with the dichotomy of rejection/humanitarian treatment (degli Uberti 2019; Tazzioli 2019, 14). At the same time 'the bordering processes and the cartographies of peripheralization, analytical frameworks on Easternism powerfully illuminate the mappings of new hierarchies of class, not just ethnicity and race, within European societies and across them' (Ballinger 2016, 62). Liminality for the migrants means precarious status, which might result in a chronic 'stuck in mobility' as they struggle to find a place to settle permanently as they are pressured to move from country to country or from shelter to shelter (Wyss 2019, 13; Donnan et al., 2017, 27). The concept of the tidemark is essential precisely in order to highlight the physicality of the bordering process both in time and space, 'temporalities and rhythms instantiated by borders in particular historical formations' (Ballinger 2016, 49).

The Balkans as a 'liminal zone of transition' (Todorova 1997, 53; Green 2013, 355–356) constitute an edge or margin, an area in a chronic economic crisis post wars; leaving asylum seekers at stake in this precarious area is clearly a political (ir)responsibility of European policies that aim at the externalize or confine in camps the migrants so as not to include them. But it is also true that migrants use tactics and strategies of resistance to make the Balkan route not only a waiting room, but a 'waiting game' and, therefore, a space of action and resistance.

The aim of this research is obviously not to approve the current policies of rejection on the margins of Europe, but to try to interpret giving more space to the real actors in migration incorporating their actions, desires and existential trajectories across space and time. This article is an attempt to read the mobility of migrants in the Balkans through geopolitical, temporal and symbolic borders; I think that we need to improve a long-term and multi-sited methodology with active participation of migrants in order to understand the juridical and temporal complexities of migration as a process constantly on the move.

Notes

1. Among others: <https://www.borderviolence.eu/> (EN); <https://medium.com/@AreYouSyrious> (En); <https://www.nonamekitchen.org/>(EN); <https://nofrontierefvg.noblogs.org/> (IT); <https://lungolarottabalcanica.wordpress.com/> (IT).
2. SPRAR = Spread hospitality with local stakeholders as a second step in refugee reception toward integration; C AS = Centre of first reception for asylum seekers,
3. The policies and practices of reception for asylum seekers in the local context of Gorizia and Trieste are very different: Gorizia delegates to a large centre of extraordinary reception outside the town, while Trieste opts for the widespread hospitality in small structures.

Notes on contributor

Roberta Altin is associate professor of cultural anthropology at the Department of Humanities, and coordinator of CIMCS - Centre for Migration and International Cooperation at the University of Trieste, Italy. Her research has mainly focused on migration, museum ethnography and intercultural education, the latest projects concerning the hospitality of asylum seekers in the border area.

ORCID

Roberta Altin  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5545-2739>

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