

# The entangled geographies of responsibility: Contested policy narratives of migration governance along the Balkan Route

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## Abstract

This article examines some of the contested geographical imaginaries of the so-called “Balkan Route” as part of the wider Mediterranean migration complex. More specifically, we interrogate how such varied imaginaries of the Route contribute to shaping conflicting geographies of responsibility for migration in the region among a shifting set of international and state actors. We highlight how the attribution of responsibility for the governance of migration is shaped by numerous geographical and historical entanglements, including on-going processes of post-conflict state-making and the geopolitics of European Union accession, with migrants becoming pawns in the negotiation of preferential relations between the countries of the region and the European Union. Focusing in particular on the framing of migration policy responses along the Croatia–Bosnia and Italy–Slovenia sections of the Route, we examine the perspectives of both policy-makers and solidarity networks active in the area, noting how their divergent narratives contribute to the proliferation of conflicting formal and informal practices of border control.

## Keywords

Balkan Route, Mediterranean, migration, borders, Bosnia, Italy

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## Introduction: At the borders of Europe

The Western Balkans have, throughout their history, been the theatre both of important migratory movements and of momentous geopolitical shifts that have shaped wider Europe. Yet while inescapably “of” Europe, the Balkans are a region that has long been imagined as Europe’s dangerous “other”, as Maria Todorova (1997) argued over 20 years ago in her *Imagining the Balkans*: European, though not entirely, “white but not quite” as Baker most recently surmised (2018). This geographical representation of the Western Balkans as Europe’s most proximate perilous hinterland has persisted to this day, with a significant difference, however. While at the time of Todorova’s writing the Balkans were imagined as a space of violence and danger mainly for the inhabitants of the region themselves, torn by wars and ethnic strife, today’s geographical imaginations of insecurity inscribe the area as threatening to “spill-over” its dangers also to the European Union – with the countries of the Western Balkans now re-imagined as a dangerous corridor labelled with the name “Balkan Route”, funnelling irregular migration to the EU’s borders.

In the article, we seek to understand the role of specific EU as well as national policy narratives in tracing what we term the “geographies of responsibility” that inscribe the Balkan Route and that assign roles to different national and local players in the region. We show how such assigning of roles and responsibilities for the management of migration along the Route not only often results in conflicting policy solutions whose effects are acutely felt by those on the move, but also permits the discharging of responsibility *tout court*. With the term “responsibility” for the governance of migration along the Route, we intend both formal and legal responsibility for the management of border crossings, as well as the responsibility for ensuring that migrants’ rights (to asylum, but also to other basic human rights) are upheld while halting or transiting through specific locations.

The externalization of blame and responsibility for irregular migration to states in the EU’s extended “Neighbourhoods” is in no way new, and certainly not unique to the countries of the Western Balkans. As the New Keywords Collective (2016) noted in examining the “hospitality crisis” of 2015–2016, in the dominant imaginaries of most EU leaders, this “crisis” had been “inflicted upon Europe” and thus “it was the proper role of the states in its wider ‘neighbourhood’ to solve [it]”. With this geographical sleight of hand, the EU

thus found [a] way to export its “crisis” to its poorer “neighbours”, neatly transforming its own “crisis” “into a neoliberal test of postcolonial ‘responsibility’”, whereby the ostensible legitimacy and sovereignty of [neighbourhood] nation-states is presumed to derive from dutiful service to the mandates of re-fortifying the borders of “Europe” (New Keywords Collective, 2016).

In the case of the Western Balkans, however, this test of responsibility has also been directly bound up with the region’s EU accession geopolitics. We will say more about this subsequently, noting how effective border management has been part and parcel of the EU’s “carrot and stick” approach in accession negotiations for the states in the region (a process we have discussed elsewhere, Authors, 2013; see also Scott et al., 2018).

The role of EU accession geopolitics is also crucial in understanding the unique place of the countries of the Western Balkans in wider Mediterranean migratory dynamics. While the Balkan Route must be conceived as integral part of the Mediterranean border-continuum that spans both “liquid” and terrestrial spaces, the fact that most of the countries of the region are either EU members or have entered into accession negotiations, places them in a quite different position vis a vis EU requests than other states in the Union’s Southern Neighbourhood who may be bound by more-or-less enforceable

“mobility partnerships” with the EU, but for whom EU membership will never be a possibility. In order to understand the performative role of policy narratives in creating distinct geographies of responsibility for migration along the Balkan Route, we must, therefore, locate them within the power dynamics of wider accession geopolitics. At the same time, however, we also need to ground our discussion in a more historically-extensive understanding of mobilities and immobilities in the countries of the former Yugoslavia, and their framing not just within current EU geopolitics but also within post-conflict, post-socialist, and, as Baker (2018) argues, post-colonial (and, we can add, racialized) dynamics.

As we will argue, the marking out of the Western Balkans as a criminal and lawless “badlands” (Bird et al., 2021), as an unruly, unregulated wild zone at Europe’s immediate frontier -that which Rexhepi (2018: 2218) has termed a “zone of vulnerability requiring constant surveillance”- is a crucial part of the geographical imaginaries that describe the Route and that, accordingly, prescribe the appropriate ways to contain its dangerous “flows” before they reach the borders of the EU. Describing the Route as an ever-shifting, “under-ground” and informal “corridor” – descriptions that populate both the European mass media and EU policy documents – further embeds today’s migration with the region’s longer associations with a racialized criminality (Bird et al., 2021; El-Sharaawi and Razsa, 2019). It is precisely such geographical imaginaries of exceptionality, danger, and lawlessness that justify the violent technologies of bordering along the Balkan Route today. Importantly, they also justify, we will suggest, the distancing and absolving of responsibility for what happens to migrants: both in extra-EU territories, but also within the EU space. Our analysis thus examines the Route as it is articulated in a non-EU state (Bosnia and Herzegovina), a state about to gain accession to the Schengen area (Croatia) and an EU and Schengen Member State (Italy – and more specifically the arrival point of the Route in the city of Trieste).

In this sense too, the Balkan Route must be seen as an integral part of the Mediterranean border-continuum, where the maintenance of the “integrity” of the EU’s external borders is enacted through different forms of violence, “both direct and indirect”, more proximate and more distant (Isakjee et al., 2020; see also Jeandesboz and Pallister-Wilkins, 2016). Indeed, the Balkan Route is a perfect illustration of how forms of externalized border “management” in the Union’s Neighbourhoods are firmly bound up with the governance of migration at and inside the EU’s borders – whether through policies of non-admission, pushbacks or chain deportation. In this entangled archipelago of migration governance, the role of specific geographical imaginaries of the Balkan Route is, again, crucial: as we will attempt to highlight in the article, assigning distinct roles and responsibilities that absolve some actors, responsabilize others, and criminalize others still.

States and international and EU agencies are not the only actors engaged in the governance of migration along the Balkan Route, however. The governance of migration along the Route – seen as part of a wider geography of formal and informal mobility – draws in a wide and diverse constellation of public, institutional, but also private actors that seek to manage the perils of “unchecked migration” through competing, and often conflicting, policy narratives. The connections among these actors are of different nature, and often overlapping, so much so that it is impossible to fully disentangle the vast web that surrounds the framing of the imaginaries that inscribe migration along the Balkan Route – and the policies designed to govern it. The juxtaposition of different kinds of movement (forward, backward, and circular), further contributes to a blurring of distinctions between “entry” and “exit” points, “receiving”, “sending”, and “transit” countries, as too of the relevant local, national and EU levels of governance designed as being “responsible” for managing migration in the region.

Drawing upon the research framework proposed by Boswell et al. (2011) for the analysis of narratives in migration policy, the article seeks to provide a provisional outline of these various narratives that inscribe migration and its “proper” management along the Balkan Route and that, we argue, contribute to the creation of overlapping, and often competing, geographies of responsibility in the area, whereby different actors claim (and, often, displace) responsibility for the governance of migratory movements. The analysis in the article draws upon a larger research project on the Balkan Route carried out between January and August 2020, focussing on the border regions of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH from now), Croatia, and Italy (Author, 2020).

After a brief overview of existing scholarship on the Balkan Route (in Section “Understanding the Balkan Route”), we outline the conceptual approach we adopt to analyse how responsibility for the management of migration is conferred as part of distinct geographical imaginaries (Section “Conceptualising the performative role of policy narratives”). Grounding our analysis within a discussion of the longer and more recent histories of migration in the region (in Section “Entangled histories and geopolitical narratives”), we proceed to examine three different national settings and different (EU/non-EU) segments of the Route, beginning with BiH (Section “Transit spaces: Bosnia and Herzegovina”), then Croatia (Section “At the borders of the European Union: Croatia”), and finally the EU “arrival point” in the Italian border city of Trieste (Section “Endgame: Trieste and the Slovenian-Italian border”). We close by drawing some conclusions regarding how the distinct geographical framing of “who is responsible where” for migrants and migration along the Route contributes to an increasing securitization and criminalization not just of migrants themselves, but also of those that seek to assist them, with the enactment of legislation of “crimes of solidarity” within EU arrival states such as Italy.

## Understanding the Balkan Route

The Western Balkans have long been a space of transit, with migrants travelling through a so-called “Balkan Route” – or “Balkan corridor” – for “at least 50 years” (Minca et al., 2018: 35). This Route “extend[s] from the Eastern Mediterranean Route going from Turkey through Greece, the countries of former Yugoslavia, continuing through to Hungary in the North and Austria in the West” (Ilievski and Tasev, 2019: 59–60). Scholarship on the most recent iterations of the Route has focused principally on the first phases of the “long summer of migration” (Ilievski and Serbos, 2016), and the role of external actors such as Turkey (Engler, 2019; Tsarouhas, 2019) in negotiating policy solutions aimed at governing migration along the route. Other work has examined how the Route’s formal “closure” in 2016, and informal re-opening, have impacted Western Balkan countries, with a progressive shift from humanitarian to securitized responses to migration (Prodromidou et al., 2019; Šelo Šabić, 2017; Sicurella, 2017; Zaragoza-Cristiani, 2017) noting how the securitization of migration contributed to turning the Western Balkans into a *de facto* buffer-area, or a series of “transit-countries”, to which the management of the refugee crisis could be outsourced. Scholars have also focused on the intersections between the securitization of international migration and humanitarian discourses along the Route (see Galijaš, 2019; Pallister-Wilkins, 2018, 2021). The work of scholars like Pastore (2019) has also highlighted how EU-Western Balkan relations have evolved following shifts in wider geopolitical narratives of migration, which have most recently assumed securitized connotations.

The most recent research has drawn attention to “the interplays between visibility and invisibility, and between repressive interventions and neglect, [which] are constitutive parts

of a geography of informal refugee mobility in the Balkan region” (Minca and Umek, 2019b). Accordingly, research has focused on the emergence of the informal practices of rejection of migrants to other countries along the Route – the so-called “pushbacks”, conceptualized by Bužinkić and Avon (2020) as a new “technology of crimmigration”, which further contribute to the de-humanization and securitization of migrant bodies. Authors such as Stohić Mitrović and Vilenica (2019) and Hameršak et al. (2020) have analysed the impact of pushbacks on patterns of migration, arguing that pushbacks have transformed the Balkan Route into what should more appropriately be termed a “Balkan Circuit”, characterized by the intersection of multi-directional movements, further blurring the distinction between “points of entry” and “points of exit” (Hameršak et al., 2020).

Connected to such scholarship has been the work on the creation of both institutionalized and migrant-created makeshift camps along the Balkan Route, with the latter “generating entirely new informal geographies of mobility as a way to engage with the challenges of new restricted and violent border practices” (Martin et al., 2020: 744–745; see also Carter-White and Minca, 2020; Katz et al., 2018; Minca et al., 2018). The work of Martin et al. (2020) has focused specifically on Serbia’s approach to the management of refugees as part of the governance of formal and informal mobilities along the Route. Through what the authors have called an “archipelago of camps”, Serbia has provided humanitarian help to migrants in the area – camps that have been conceptualized as (bio)political tools key to “managing and containing selected individuals ‘in custody’ and separate from the rest of society, not for what they have done, but for who they are and what they represent as a ‘population’”, while at the same time appropriated by those who inhabit them as sites of political resistance (Martin et al., 2020: 759; see also Minca, 2015). Such archipelagos of camps exist in differing fashion along different segments of the Route: for example in BiH, a context that we examine in the current article, the sharp increase in arrivals in 2018 “coincided with a related humanitarian crisis in the north-western Canton of Una Sana [...]” (Minca and Umek, 2019a), with Bosnian authorities lacking the necessary economic and human resources, as well as suitable infrastructures (Halimović, 2019) to manage the arrivals: a key factor in examining the policy narratives that we will discuss subsequently.

The archipelago of camps that entraps migrants in Western Balkan countries also needs to be considered in relation to recent carceral geography scholarship which has pointed to how traditionally non-“prison” spaces can, nevertheless, be conceptualized as “carceral”. Accordingly, that what Mountz et al. (2012: 524) conceptualize as “detention” can similarly be extended to denote a series of processes based on temporal and spatial logics and which highlight “paradoxical issues of containment and mobility, as well as bordering and exclusion built into national and transnational landscapes of detention” (see also Moran and Turner, 2022; Peters and Turner, 2016).

The biopolitical control of migrants through mobility across such carceral spaces has been discussed elsewhere in the Mediterranean by Tazzioli (2020: 31) who describes how migrants are “crafted as possible objects of knowledge” through mechanisms of partition, that create “generalizable singularities [that] translate the materiality of individual stories and identities into a virtual population that has not only a descriptive function but also an anticipatory one that works as a blueprint for partitioning migrants”. In the context of the Balkan Route specifically, Minca and Collins (2021: 2) have examined such migratory biopolitics as part of what they term “The Game”: the term coined by migrants to describe their multiple attempts to reach the EU through the Balkan Route, as “a spatial tactic implemented by the refugees as a way of engaging with the impossibility of legally travelling to their desired destinations” (Minca and Collins, 2021: 2).

We will say more about the role of migrants' own spatial tactics and forms of resistance in making and re-making the Route in the closing sections of the article, conscious of the fact that focussing solely on practices of biopolitical governance risks only further reducing migrants' subjectivities to mere subjects of practices of control. There is a wide scholarship on these questions, including work in the Autonomy of Migration perspective, that emphasizes the constitutive force of migrants' resistance, and of mobility per se, in the very formation of sovereign power (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; see also Mezzadra, 2004; Papadopoulos et al., 2008; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013), and that calls for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between sovereign power and the autonomy of migrants (see, among others, Garelli et al., 2018; Squire, 2015, 2021; Tazzioli, 2018) (for an in-depth discussion of this debate see Vaughan-Williams, 2015: 8–9).

Finally, we are also inspired by scholarship engaging with the concept of migratory "routes" as distinct cartographic narratives "of migration" deriving from EU policy-geographies that partition the world into "concentric circles of uneven mobilities", tracing "routes" from countries of origin to those of destinations, as Casas-Cortes and Cobarrubias (2019: 200) have argued. Indeed, the authors (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015: 900) distinguish between "routes" and "itineraries", defining the former as spatial configurations meant to channel migrant mobilities into linear routes, and the latter as the "migrants' paths and passages whose spatial configurations always exceed the ability of formal routes management to synthesize and regulate them". We also draw, accordingly, on Walters' (2015: 473) notion of *viapolitics*, which stresses the importance of mobility infrastructures, such as vehicles, roads, and routes, which he conceptualizes as "mobile zones of governance" and of migratory struggles "in their own right".

### **Conceptualising the performative role of policy narratives**

Since 2015, the Balkan Route has taken on different, sometimes overlapping, physical and imagined shapes, as too the attempts to govern those flows. In the paragraphs that follow, we attempt an analysis of the geographies of responsibility along the Balkan Route by analyzing the role of distinct policy narratives. We conceptualize policy narratives here as representations of a policy issue that act to essentialize and simplify the issues at stake (Kaplan, 1986) and, more specifically, as "process[es] of image making, where the images have to do fundamentally with attributing cause, blame and responsibility" and thus "link suffering with an identifiable agent" (Stone, 1989: 282–300).

In our analysis, we examine both the performative role of EU policy narratives as well as of the actors who make conscious efforts to advance some policy solutions over others. As we will demonstrate, both contribute in important ways to the coding of spaces as "appropriate" or "inappropriate" for migrant reception – and "safe" or "unsafe" for the local population. In this sense, migration management policies can be said to actively make space: as Bird et al. (2021: 30) note, "it is through a process of naming embodied within policy discourses that places and spaces come to be designated and understood as either 'bad' or 'good' [for migration and migrants]". This is also reflected by the tendency in official narratives to label countries by means of their function in the management of migration ("transit", "sending", "receiving"). Such labels are far from neutral: the term "transit countries", a term that draws upon the concept of "transit migration", coincides "with EU efforts to negotiate return and deportation policies with many non-EU neighbours and various sending countries" as Düvell (2012: 420) has argued. These labels also do not recognize the non-linear nature of Mediterranean migration – characterized increasingly

by stoppage, confinement, containment and pushbacks (see, among others, İşleyen, 2018a, 2018b; Jacobsen et al., 2020; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013).

Such narratives, strongly marked by cartographic route-thinking (Casas-Cortes and Cobarrubias, 2019), contribute to an “overdetermination of borders and, more generally, of an ever more essentialized understanding of the relation between territory and human mobility” (Pastore, 2019: 20), with the catch-all geographical metaphor of a “Balkan Route” permitting both media as well as policy discourses to simplify the highly variegated journeys undertaken by migrants travelling through this region (Pastore, 2019: 18). Such metaphors, moreover, feed into the imaginary of generalized migration “flows”, which obscures “the heterogeneity of migrants’ subjective drives and desires that cannot be reduced to nor contained within overarching explanations about why migrants move and what they want” (Tazzioli, 2020: 33).

Drawing upon data collected as part of a wider research project carried out between January and August 2020 (Author, 2020), we ground our analysis in Boswell et al.’s (2011) conceptualization of policy narratives as causal narratives, constitutive of three elements: (1) A set of claims related to the nature of the policy issue at stake; (2) A set of claims concerning the causes of said issue, which include questions like “whose fault is it?” “Whose responsibility is it?”; and (3) A set of claims concerning possible policy solutions, focusing in particular on the second aspect regarding the conferral of responsibility. Adopting Pastore’s (2019) inductive content analysis approach, our research was guided by the following empirical questions: (1) What is constructed as a failure in the management of migration along the Balkan Route?; and (2) Who is to blame for the failures of migration management policy responses and thus bears responsibility for its resolution? The collected data were thus analyzed according to these two key questions, positing that constructing a “policy failure” is the first step in order to attribute the responsibility for the management of migration along the Route.

The analysis brings together an in-depth assessment of relevant EU policy documents and official sources together with interviews with some of the institutional actors and solidarity activists engaged in the elaboration of official narratives, key in order to convey the fluid nature of policy narratives which are constantly being negotiated and contested. Indeed, as the Route becomes increasingly perilous and inhospitable, with migrants subject to a series of pushbacks, expulsions and evictions, it is important to give voice to the work of some of the many solidarity actors that contrast, counteract, or offer alternative narratives of responsibility to the ones adopted by policy-makers. There exist, in fact, a myriad of solidarity organizations and networks, active at the local, national, trans-national and international scales, that through their work make up a different Balkan Route. While, as has already been noted, it is also crucial to account for migrants’ own voices and “unruly acts” in the negotiation and contestation of such narratives of responsibility, this discussion is unfortunately beyond the scope of the current article.

The process of data collection proceeded hand-in-hand with a mapping of the wider archipelago of “bordering actors” (to use Bigo’s, 2001 term) that were identified as having a role in the construction (or deconstruction) of narratives of migration management along the Balkan Route. A first mapping was conducted after the analysis of policy documents, and was used in order to select a first group of research participants. Interviews conducted at a later stage, instead, were organized by following the connections that emerged from the analysis of the responses of the first interviewees. Interviewees all gave informed consent but expressed the wish to be protected by different degrees of anonymity; some are, therefore, identified solely by reference to their institutional role; for others, even this specific information is not provided at their request.<sup>1</sup>

## Entangled histories and geopolitical narratives

Alongside the most recent scholarship on migration along the Balkan Route, it is also important to locate today's movements in the region within a longer history of migration in South-Eastern Europe. In her analysis of the intersections and entanglements of histories of race, ethnicity, and nationhood in these territories, Baker (2018: 58) borrows from Pratt (2008) in describing the area corresponding to the former Yugoslavia as a “global” – not just regional – “contact zone”, with its histories of migration directly bound to the imperial histories of the region as a frontline between the imperial spheres of competition and influence of the Ottoman and Habsburg empires, with migration being mainly the result of wars, re-settlements, colonialism, and, eventually, the collapse of the Ottoman empire (Baker, 2018). The history of South-Eastern Europe's migrations in the 19th century<sup>2</sup> has often been described as a history of nation-making, especially of Serbian nationalism, and its competition with the Habsburg project in the region, and was characterized by forced displacement, expulsions, and internal resettlement at the beginning of post-First World War Yugoslavia (Baker, 2018). Internal migration was also very relevant in Tito's Yugoslavia in the post-World War II years, taking place both within and between Yugoslav Socialist Republics, at the same time intersecting with the “othering” and the racialization of some ethnic groups, such as Albanians and Roma (Baker, 2018). During the Cold War, out-migration from the Yugoslav Republics mainly concerned the movement of *Gastarbeiter*, mostly directed to Germany (Pastore, 2019: 14).

After the collapse of Yugoslavia and the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, the Balkan Route was used as a smuggling trail to transport weapons and drugs from Turkey to Europe, but also by migrants travelling to Europe from the Middle East as well as from North Africa, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (Mandić, 2017). In the 1990s, these movements began to intersect with “migrations around or out” the region, with the Western Balkans acting both as a “receiving” area of migration from post-Soviet Eastern Europe and a “sending” area (Baker, 2018). It is in these years that Pastore (2019) observes how migration from the region emerged in the European public debate with the displacement of large numbers of refugees following the Yugoslav Wars (during the Bosnian Wars alone, more than 2 million people were displaced).

From a more securitized understanding of EU–Western Balkans relations, a “humanitarian frame” became the dominant trait of a newly established geopolitical narrative – a narrative that was reinforced by the outbreak of the Kosovo War in 1999 (Pastore, 2019). In subsequent years, following the development of EU–Western Balkans negotiations on visa liberalization, the Western Balkans were progressively inscribed into a narrative of “safety” and of cultural and geographical proximity to Europe, which contributed to the delegitimization of the demands for international protection from the citizens of the area (Pastore, 2019: 18). At the same time, the imaginaries of progressive stabilization and “Europeanization” of the region intersected with an imaginary describing the Western Balkans as the dangerous doorstep of Europe, placed neither inside nor outside the imagined European space, with the Balkan Wars fundamentally challenging the EU security paradigm (Woodward, 1995).

It was, however, during the 2015 migration crisis that the geopolitical metaphor of the “Western Balkan Route” became prominent, as the Western Balkans became a key transit passage for migrants directed towards the EU (Šelo Šabić, 2016: 4). The Balkans thus firmly entered “the new, largely migration-driven, geopolitical *Weltanschauung* of the European Union” (Pastore, 2019: 13), with migration becoming a key concern in EU–Western Balkans relations largely after 2015. As Cobarrubias (2020) has argued, the relations between the EU



and countries in its extended Neighbourhoods have long been defined through proper conduct and the maintenance of “ordered” spaces in which “proper” border management is key. Indeed, as Grzymiski (2019: 145) has argued, Neighbourhood states’ “Europeanness” has been increasingly assessed through their ability to border “in the image of the EU”. At the same time, however, as Grzymiski (2019) and scholars such as Scott et al. (2018), Cobarrubias (2020) and van Houtum (2021) have noted, there is a direct tension between these states’ need to conform to “European norms and values” in border management – and their designated role in acting as a securitizing “buffer zone” for the Union. As Laure Delcour (2019) has suggested, examining narratives regarding the role of Neighbourhood states in the EU’s migration policies brings to light the contradictions of the Union’s accession geopolitics: is cooperation on migration simply a means of self-protection for the EU, or is it a means towards transformation and “Europeanization”? This tension was directly evident in the policy narratives that we examined as well.

While 2015 was a key turning point in policy narratives, it is important to note that ever since that moment the Balkan Route underwent a series of reconfigurations following a chain of national and EU policy interventions aimed at regulating, and eventually closing, this corridor, including the fencing of the Hungarian border (Šelo Šabić, 2016: 2); the closure of the North Macedonia-Greece border (Keridis, 2016: 9); and the signature of the EU-Turkey Deal in 2016 (Tsarouhas, 2019: 36). As we and other scholars have described elsewhere (Authors, 2018), the push for what then became known as the “Turkey Deal” was articulated by German and Dutch politicians around the need to regain control over external borders by halting the “unmanageable flow” of migrants making their way towards the EU through the Balkan Route (European Stability Initiative (ESI), 2015). The Deal reconfigured the border geographies, both real and imagined, of the Route, by “reproduc[ing] the EU border [...] thereby pulling the EU border into the Turkish state”, as İşleyen argued (2018a: 31, 2018b). It is in the aftermath of these events that the Balkan Route was formally declared as “closed”, in a Tweet published by the then President of the European Council Donald Tusk (@eucopresident, 2016).<sup>3</sup>

Migratory movements along the Route continued, however, though on a much smaller scale, all through the following months (Galijaš, 2019). The year 2018, however, witnessed a steep increase in migrant arrivals along the Balkan Route, which are still very much observable today. The post-2018 geographical configuration of the Route comprises two new borderlands, from which two nodal points emerge: the Bosnian town of Bihać, at the border between Croatia and BiH, and the Italian city of Trieste, at the border between Italy and Slovenia (Minca et al., 2018; Minca and Umek, 2019a, 2019b). The surge of arrivals at the Bosnian border, mainly in the Una Sana Canton and the refugee camps in the municipalities of Bihać and Velika Kladuša, quickly led to the emergence of a humanitarian crisis in the region (Halimović, 2019). The Italian border city of Trieste, at the same time, came to be identified by the migrants as the point of entry of the Route into the EU (Minca and Umek, 2020), and was later conceptualized as the “Endgame” of the Balkan Route (Minca and Collins, 2021: 9).

Another important point to consider within this wider context is the longer history of solidarity networks active along the Balkan Route – a history which has more recently taken a shift towards patterns of criminalization of solidarity. It is indeed trans-Balkan and trans-national solidarity networks that have been key in documenting the practices of informal expulsion now universally known as “pushbacks” (Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN), 2020b). The work of such networks has also been key to those that Vicky Squire (2018: 111–112) defines as “mobile solidarities” (for a critical reflection on volunteer activism and research along the Route see Jordan and Moser, 2020). Chiara Milan (2019) has

described in detail the emergence of such solidarities in the Western Balkans, noting now the years 2015–2016 were a “watershed” for the region, spurring a broader mobilization of citizens, with the emergence of solidarity movements first at the local level, and later in trans-Balkan networks. The COVID-19 pandemic has further enhanced connections between organizations from Greece to Trieste, but it has also furnished further justification to criminalize solidarity movements (Milan 2019, 2021).<sup>4</sup>

### **Transit spaces: Bosnia and Herzegovina**

As previously noted, the Balkan Route has never been the linear “corridor” invoked by EU politicians. In the following, we interrogate the different geographical imaginaries that describe the Route, focusing on how these narratives respond to questions related to blame and responsibility, and begin by examining a non-EU actor along the Balkan Route: Bosnia and Herzegovina.

We first delve into the labelling of BiH as a “transit country”. This discussion is important as EU efforts to outsource border controls to Western Balkan states, as well as backward and circular movements caused by pushbacks, have created an on-the-ground geography that, in practice, entraps migrants in countries such as BiH and Serbia. These countries are, however, labelled as “transit countries” in EU policy-solutions and practices, and, therefore, deemed responsible for the management of migrants on their territories. The use of the term “transit country” is also problematic insofar as it implies that there is no limitation to the agency of migrants’ journeys, their ability to choose their own path and, therefore, their own “destination country” (a point contested by Minca and Collins (2021) in their conceptualization of “The Game”; see also Tazzioli, 2018). This imaginary also entirely occludes the ways in which specific policy choices and practices of border control (both EU and those implemented by Western Balkan states) act to obstacle and re-direct migrant journeys (see Bird et al., 2021) and, therefore, obscures the responsibility of the EU.

In the context of BiH, we can see that the country’s responsibility to manage migration has been strictly linked to a narrative that defines the country as a “candidate for EU accession”. This embeds migration governance in the context of BiH efforts to comply with the EU asylum *acquis*. Although the country’s compliance is tracked yearly, our interviewee from the Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG HOME) argued that BiH should not be penalized for not being able to manage the increasing arrivals into the country, and the facilities aimed to provide migrants with a place to stay, as well as medical and legal support, seen as the main “policy failure” of BiH, since this is a requirement that not even EU Member States seem to be able to satisfy (DG HOME, 2020, in-person interview). A different perspective was offered by a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) who, instead, was very firm in arguing that BiH should not be allowed into the EU as long as the conditions of its reception centres remained inhumane and until the country could be assessed as being able to uphold human rights – the core value upon which the EU is built (MEP, 2020, in-person interview).

In such framings, we can identify some of the principal forms of “blame” that are conferred upon BiH. Much of the data we collected seemed to point to the fact that one of the main problems which contributed to BiH’s ineffectiveness in governing migration was the lack of cooperation between its regional entities, namely the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republika Srpska, and the Brčko district. In this sense, the “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council: Commission Opinion on Bosnia and Herzegovina’s application for membership of the European Union” (European Commission, 2019b) reads that BiH is facing issues with the “internal

decision-making process as well as uncertainty and overlaps between the country's various levels of government [ . . . ]". The European Commission's recommendation, therefore, is for BiH to invest in building "effective coordination, at all levels, of border management and migration management capacity, as well as [ . . . ] the functioning of the asylum system." This is further elaborated in the "Analytical Report accompanying the Opinion on Bosnia and Herzegovina's application for membership of the European Union" (European Commission, 2019a), which underlines that both border management and asylum are constitutionally sanctioned as part of the exclusive competences of the Bosnian central government and thus BiH should assume full responsibility for the failures of harmonizing migration policy approaches throughout the country.

Our interviewee from the EU Delegation to BiH remarked, indeed, that the Bosnian authorities had been relying on the assumption that migration would only be a temporary phenomenon, and that the EU would somehow provide the humanitarian assistance needed by migrants. But the Bosnian government, our interviewee emphasised, would need to support such burden-sharing, and denounced the complete absence of ownership by the Bosnian state of reception centres for migrants, which are mainly run by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (EU Delegation to BiH, 2020, online interview). This was further elaborated upon by an interviewee from a policy-officer in a Directorate-General of the European Commission,<sup>5</sup> who argued that bilateral action was needed at the Bosnian level, with the Bosnian state taking more active control of migration. According to the interviewee, the greatest resistance to cooperation was the Republika Srpska, which had been refusing to convert infrastructures into reception centres, and whose authorities had been detected escorting refugees out of their territories and into the Una-Sana Canton (DG at the European Commission (EC), 2020, in-person interview).

Bosnian authorities have been active in contesting this narrative, by arguing for a shift in the labelling of migration management from a "Bosnian issue" to an "EU issue" (DG at the EC, 2020, in-person interview). This counter-narrative places the "blame" for migration instead with EU practices of the "outsourcing" of borders, with BiH "stuck with having to 'defend' the EU's external borders" (Vale, 2018). A similar shifting of blame was called for by a group of MEPs during a Plenary Assembly of the European Parliament in November 2019 (European Parliament, 2019), with German MEP Cornelia Ernst, amongst others, tracing the main cause of the humanitarian crisis in BiH to the EU and its Member States, and their failure to uphold human values and to enforce their compliance onto Croatian border authorities.

The nature of the Western Balkans as a "post-conflict" space, and the contested history of the region's borders, has also importantly influenced the relations between the EU and BiH. In 2019, the European Commission wrote in the EC Opinion that "the political environment [in BiH] is not yet conducive to reconciliation and to overcoming the legacies of the past" (European Commission, 2019b). In fact, the responsibility of BiH to engage in processes of transitional justice has often been leveraged with more concessions from the EU in terms of visa liberalization, as well as with advancement in the negotiation for EU accession. The narratives which inscribe the Western Balkans into a post-conflict context, however, can also have the effect of placing responsibility onto EU's shoulders. For example, our interview with an MEP (, selected for interview in light of his advocacy work to denounce the emergence of the humanitarian crisis in the country) highlighted that BiH's status as a post-conflict state makes it imperative for the EU to maintain stability in the country, which should translate into efforts to support BiH in the management of the migration humanitarian crisis (MEP, 2020, in-person interview).

In this respect, a DG ECHO factsheet outlines that since 2018 alone, the EU has provided €89 million “directly to Bosnia and through implementing partners”; of which €13.8 million in humanitarian aid to BiH, and specifically to the areas of Una-Sana Canton, Sarajevo and Tuzla (European Commission, 2021). Casting a positive light onto EU activities in the region aims to create a narrative whereby the Union has upheld its responsibilities – and can, therefore, no longer be blamed for the failures of migration management in the region. This view was shared by the representative from the EU Delegation to Bosnia, who assessed EU interventions in the area as “exceptional”. The EU, they argued, had been collaborating with a diverse pool of partners in BiH and had managed to restructure, refurbish and build reception centres, and to grant medical, legal, and psychological help to migrants (EU Delegation to BiH, 2020, online interview). Although not sharing this celebratory approach to the role of the EU in BiH, our DG interviewee argued that the EU had also promoted smaller-scale initiatives, meant to create an environment where both the migrants and the local population could feel “safer”: for instance, the installation of public lighting in Bihac (DG at the EC, 2020, in-person interview).

### **At the borders of the European Union: Croatia**

Croatia is another key actor in the narratives and subsequent mapping of responsibility along the Balkan Route for its specific status of an EU Member States that has recently been declared eligible for accession to the Schengen area, as well as to the Eurozone. More importantly, Croatian authorities are amongst the most active perpetrators of practices of pushbacks of migrants at the border with BiH. This section will delve deeper into the narratives inscribing responsibilities onto Croatia, some of which frame the country as the “watchdog of Europe” and its external borders, while others insist on Croatia taking full responsibility for the violence perpetrated at its borders.<sup>6</sup>

The interviewed MEP strongly argued for the need to politically pressure Croatia to uphold EU and international law and fundamental rights. In their opinion, dealing with such practices of border management should have been a deal breaker in the negotiations for Croatian accession to the Schengen area (MEP, 2020, in-person interview). The DG interviewee also told us that the Commission had recognized that violence was being perpetrated by Croatian authorities in the “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the verification of the full application of the Schengen acquis by Croatia” (European Commission, 2019c):

The protection of human rights of asylum seekers and other migrants, and the allegations of denial of access to the asylum procedure and of use of force by law enforcement officials at the border remain a challenge. All the measures taken by Croatia for the control of its external borders must comply with the Charter, EU and international human rights obligations (including the principle of *non-refoulement* and effective access to the asylum procedure).

According to the DG interviewee, the sole fact that violence was mentioned in an official document was a sign that the Commission was taking a stand on the issue. However, they argued, the political will to effectively enforce compliance was still lacking at the Member State level (DG at the EC, 2020, in-person interview).

In this respect, the interviewee from DG HOME argued that the Commission was taking the reports of NGOs and solidarity networks very seriously. Nevertheless, there was still the need to gather “reliable testimonies”, as NGOs seemed to be unable to substantiate their allegations with “hard facts”, which would be needed in order to initiate an infringement

procedure against Croatia. The interviewee also highlighted what they described as the dual role of Croatia vis-à-vis international migration. They argued, in fact, that the Croatian border is one of the longest external EU borders and that the country needs to “both uphold human rights and protect the EU”. The EU, they noted, had been addressing the problem by allocating emergency funds to the country through the EMAS (Emergency Assistance grant scheme), allocated between 2018 and 2019, and destined towards the creation of a monitoring mechanism for the respect of human rights at the border. Access to these funds was conditional upon the willingness of the Croatian government to allow NGOs to access police records. What is more, the interviewee explained that the EU ensures that Croatian border authorities attend compulsory training on cultural differences, on how to deal with refugees and at-risk-populations. They noted that it would be “incoherent and inconsistent” for the Commission to initiate an infringement procedure against Croatia whilst funding a monitoring mechanism and investing towards the education of Croatian border authorities (DG HOME, 2020, in-person interview).

As our research revealed, Croatian border authorities, as well as some Croatian MEPs, have insisted on depicting Croatia as the “first point of entry” of migrants into the EU (European Parliament, 2019). This choice of an alternative geographical imaginary of “entry point” rather than “transit” or “passage point” is crucial, for it allows Croatian authorities to justify violent pushbacks and containment at their border by appealing to their role in the “protection” of the EU’s own external borders. In this case, responsibility is claimed by Croatia, as too the legitimacy to act according to the position that this narrative attributes to the country as part of the Balkan Route. During our interview, a representative from the European Stability Initiative (ESI) think tank noted that

It’s [...] interesting how difficult it is for people to understand that the Bosnian-Croatian border is the second EU-non-EU border that people have to pass [...]. There is the North-Macedonian-Greek border as well, there is the Bulgaria-Serbia border as well. A lot of people that discuss the issue have a sense that Croatia is the first EU country that migrants come to. Sometimes it is. I don’t know, to be honest, I was in Zagreb in November, and I talked to some people and some of them have the feeling that doing pushbacks and, even being violent in doing that, is keeping refugees in Greece and Turkey from coming to the EU because the message spreads: “If you get to Croatia, you might get hurt.” (ESI, 2020, online interview)

This reflects Bird et al.’s (2021: 32) argument that the geographical imaginary of a linear Balkan Route “obscures the fact that most routes take people *through* the EU; one must enter the EU first through Bulgaria or Greece, in order to be on the ‘Western Balkan Route’ as it is currently mapped by Frontex”.

Numerous solidarity organizations have been active in denouncing the role of Croatian border authorities, as well as the Italian and Slovenian ones in such practices of pushbacks. The Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) has denounced the role of Frontex, recently confirmed as taking active part in episodes of “pushbacks” (BVMN, 2020a). According to BVMN, pushbacks have become by now part and parcel of EU migration management. In fact, as they wrote in their August 2020 report (BVMN, 2020c), “the system of pushbacks (defined as informal readmissions) is now well organized and structured, however, there is no publicly accessible information to the numbers of the people who are returned”. BVMN further denounced that

The movement of armed forces into migration management, pushbacks from reception centers and the development of targeted torture like practices within the pandemic period (such as spray

tagging by Croatian police officers) have highlighted the way lockdown measures were used as a period to stage more aggressive rights suspensions against people-on-the-move (BVMN, n.d.).

BVMN reported cases of pushbacks throughout the whole 2021, collecting hard evidence, as in the case of video footage of a group pushback perpetrated by Croatian authorities at the border with BiH- footage that “adds to a growing archive of visual material taken at this border which stretches back to 2018” (BVMN, 2021).

### **Endgame: Trieste and the Slovenian-Italian border**

The final site where the above-described narratives come together is the Italian border with Slovenia, and the border city of Trieste, which has been conceptualized as the “Endgame” of the Balkan Route. This, however, does not mean that migrants’ journeys necessarily end in Trieste. In fact, while some migrants are “incorporated into the humanitarian system of hospitality and enter the EU machinery of identification, relocation, asylum protection”, others are “met with new forms of dispersal and, at times, even repatriation” (Minca and Collins, 2020: 9). Some migrants, as Minca and Collins (2020: 9) argue, prefer to continue to further destinations, as part of a “different ‘game’”.

A key point of contention in policy narratives of this part of the Route is the role (and accordant geographical label) to be assigned to Italy, and to Trieste. Following the 2015–2018 deviations of the Route, Italy became a “country of first arrival” into the EU (Minca and Umek, 2019b): that is, the first country in which migrants would want to apply for asylum, or, to use another geographical label, a “recipient country”. While both the IOM as well as Italian national authorities continue to use this label, our interviews with both the representative of the EU Delegation to Bosnia (EU Delegation to BiH, 2020, online interview) and with the Trieste solidarity organization Linea d’Ombra<sup>7</sup> (Linea d’Ombra, 2020, online interview), highlighted that Italy should more accurately be considered a “transit country” for most migrants. As one activist from Linea d’Ombra recounted to us, migrants are less and less keen to stay in Italy, both due to the lack of opportunities and support, but also fearing expulsion by Italian border authorities; recent arrivals thus attempt to remain hidden to circumvent the Dublin Regulation so as to be able to proceed further, towards France, Germany, or other EU countries. According to the activist, the narrative framing of Trieste as an arrival point simply contributes to attempts by authorities to ignore the role of the city as a borderland area. As he noted:

To stop migration is like stopping water with your hands: you cannot do it. If you are at the border of a route that is travelled by dozens of people every day, you need to equip yourself to be able to receive them. What has been happening here, instead, also due to a matter of political orientation [of the local authorities], is the pretence that the problem will go away. (Linea D’Ombra, 2020, online interview)

Questioning the narrative inscribing Trieste as a final “arrival point”, our interviewee said that migrants feel more and more threatened in Trieste, as they fear that they are going to be pushed back and thus, to have to restart their “Game”. Already prior to the pandemic, the BMVN noted that “Trieste [is] no longer a safe destination” (BVMN, 2020b).

This situation was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with the governor of the Friuli Venezia Giulia region Massimiliano Fedriga (from the right-wing Lega party) and Trieste’s mayor Roberto Dipiazza both feeding distrust of migrants as now (also) a viral threat. The political instrumentalization of the pandemic in feeding further anti-migrant

sentiment has been denounced by the activists of another Trieste-based solidarity organization, Strada Si.Cura (meaning “safe passage” but also “caring passage” in Italian). The organization has campaigned actively to contest the use of a narrative of the *migrante untore* (the migrant as a viral spreader), while also drawing attention to the multiple instances in which migrants were denied medical help, not granted sanitary protection during the pandemic – or placed in forced quarantine,<sup>8</sup> echoing the wider practices of what Tazzioli and Stierl (2021) have described as “deterrence humanitarianism” in the management of migration in the Mediterranean during the pandemic.

Another narrative battle in the context of Trieste surrounds the issue of the terminology used to describe these informal practices of border control, and in particular the choice of terms between “readmissions” and “pushbacks”. The various solidarity organizations we interviewed all contested the use of the term “readmissions” adopted by the Italian authorities.<sup>9</sup> The interviewee from Linea d’Ombra told us that the organization was in fact particularly concerned with the vocabulary used to talk about migrant arrivals in Trieste. As they noted, “it would be wonderful if it was possible [...] to have a little more accuracy and coherence in describing [migrant] situations” for “it is also on a linguistic level that these games are played. It all comes down to how the elected politician, the person who is in power at that moment, wants to depict the issue” (Linea d’Ombra, 2020, online interview). The linguistic choice between the terms “readmissions” vs. “pushbacks”, is indeed crucially important, as it can attribute positive or negative connotations to the very same practices, and thus contribute to their legitimization or de-legitimization. What is more, it allows Italian authorities to directly violate the Dublin Regulations by re-naming what are, in practice, forms of push-back and non-admission, as informal “re-admissions” (in the case of this particular border, to Slovenia as another EU member state – see the discussion in Fierro, 2021).

But our own terminology when describing the co-existence of multiple “Balkan Routes” with different trajectories was also contested by our interviewee from Linea d’Ombra: an important reminder that also our choice of analytical terminology deserves scrutiny for the assumptions it may conceal. In responding to our description of the system of chain pushbacks as a sort of “inverted Balkan Route”, our interviewee remarked that they found it curious that we should choose to

Speak of two “Balkan Routes”, one that goes towards Europe and one that comes back [for pushbacks]. Yes, [...] the Route is what the migrants do in order to get here [...] but it baffled me to hear the same term for something that is not the desire of the migrant but is instead the destruction of their dream. These are details of meaning that you have to consider.” (Linea d’Ombra, 2020, online interview)

We would like to highlight this comment in closing, for it is precisely in such “details of meaning” that the different geographies of the Route find their expression, details that can make a fundamental difference to demarcating who is responsible for migrants and who can discharge themselves, legally or not, from that responsibility.

## **Conclusions: Securing migration, also “in” Europe?**

The adoption of the geographical label of a “Western Balkan Route” or “Balkan Route” as part of EU policy narratives of migration presumes the existence of a single line, a single “corridor” on the map that gathers within it different migratory “flows”, with different directions of movement, and crossing different countries. As such, it assigns specific roles

to the territories – here, to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Italy – that are traversed by the Route: roles that can vary from passive victims, to enablers, to (failed) policemen responsible for governing the movements traversing their sovereign spaces. It is a geographical imagination that brings with it a distinct territorial coding of blame and responsibility, as noted by Boswell et al. (2011) – and indeed often a combination of both. These roles are not only “assigned” to the territories (and their presumed sovereign powers) by the EU institutions seeking to manage migration in the region. They are also roles that are self-ascribed by national and local actors – and roles that also often shift, resulting in the emergence of contradictory if not conflicting policy solutions.

Our analysis has aimed to foreground how a variety of contested policy narratives attributing blame and responsibility for migration shape the entangled geographies of the Balkan Route today and, as such, also the lives of those who traverse it. By examining some of the actors shaping these narratives along a specific part of the Route, we have tried to highlight how the attribution of blame and responsibility *both* relies upon *and* acts to reproduce specific geographical imaginaries of migration and migrants in this region: imaginaries that are never innocent. The example of the contested use of the terms “pushbacks” rather than “readmissions” is illustrative, permitting the discharging also of legal responsibility. We have also highlighted other examples of how actors adopt particular narratives to absolve themselves from the attribution of responsibility, for instance in the context of EU officials arguing for the fulfilment of the Union’s responsibilities by showcasing the funds invested in BiH. At the same time, we noted the vital role played by solidarity organizations and engaged MEPs both in drawing attention to the discharging of the EU’s or national obligations, but also in crafting alternative imaginaries of the Route in order to counter the violence of the EU border regime.

Nevertheless, as important as the work of such solidarity organizations has been in providing at least temporary protection to migrants travelling across the region, they too have faced policies of bordering and securitization – and increasingly criminalization. In the late spring of 2021, the home of the founders of the Trieste association Linea d’Ombra, Gianandrea Franchi and Lorena Fornasir, was raided by the police, their computer impounded and they themselves were put on trial for the charges of “aiding and abetting illegal migration”, accused (also by the local press) of colluding with a network of criminal smugglers (Linea d’Ombra, 2021a; 2021b). Placing the “blame” for illegal migration on solidarity activists allows EU states like Italy to thus “stretch” formal and informal practices of border control also within “European” spaces; namely, the actual homes of European citizens who engage in practices of solidarity..

Just as we were preparing this article for submission, the Italian authorities announced that the judicial proceedings against Franchi and Fornasir had been dropped “for lack of proof”. The defence attorneys had succeeded in moving the case away from Trieste since Lorena Fornasir would have been involved in the investigation. As an honorary judge serving at Trieste’s juvenile tribunal, a case directly involving her would, according to protocol, need to be assigned to another court. The Bologna judge who dismissed the case declared in his statement that there was no proof that could point to the involvement of Linea d’Ombra in the facilitation of irregular entries into Italy nor in the transit of migrants towards other Member States of the EU (ASGI, 2021; Consorzio Italiano di Solidarietà (ICS) 2021, Linea d’Ombra ODV 2021; Marvulli, 2021). While it would be tempting to see this as a hopeful development, the criminal accusations against Linea d’Ombra are just one example of what national solidarity associations such as the ICS have described as an increasingly hostile political and “cultural” climate in Italy, epitomised by the recent case of the conviction of the Mayor of Riace (Calabria) Mimmo Lucano to 13 years of prison.



Lucano was known across Europe for the success of his model of “accoglienza diffusa” (“extended reception”) of migrants and his work was an inspiration for many other cities (Camilli, 2021). Lucano’s fate – as that of countless other less well-known activists criminalized for their attempts to assist migrants, along the Balkan Route but also along other, equally perilous routes – should make us think critically about how the geographies of responsibility for migration are being inscribed today. The entanglements of the EU’s border regime reach not only far beyond the confines of EU/Europe, they also reach within the EU space, increasingly making use of domestic criminal law to delimit not just who is deserving of assistance – but also who is permitted to offer that assistance and where.<sup>10</sup>

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### Notes

1. A note is necessary regarding the modalities of the interviews. Due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, only half of the interviews could be conducted *in loco* (institutional interviews in Brussels), while the remainder had to be conducted remotely, with respondents in BiH as well as in Trieste. Conducting interviews remotely certainly impacted relations of trust between interviewer and interviewees: the expert interviewees who wanted to maintain anonymity, for instance, could not physically make sure that their words were not being recorded and were thus much more likely to be cautious in their responses, often repeating information that could be found in policy documents and official websites. Remote interviews with solidarity organizations, on the other hand, did not seem to replicate such difficulties. The interviews with these latter were conducted in Italian and translated by the Authors.
2. While it is not the focus of this paper, it is important to note that the longer history of migration in the Western Balkans has never been unidirectional. Indeed, East and South-bound migration was much more important in shaping migration movements through this region in the 19th century, as millions left the region to migrate to the Ottoman lands of Anatolia.
3. The Tweet can be found here: <https://twitter.com/eucopresident/status/707543984890060800>. The Twitter account from which the Tweet was published is now under the name of Charles Michel, who succeeded Donald Tusk as President of the European Council in 2019.
4. There is by now an extensive literature examining the criminalization of solidarity in the wider Mediterranean space – see, among others, Carrera et al. (2019), Cusumano (2019), Cuttitta (2018), Heller and Pezzani (2018), Mainwaring and DeBono (2021), Tazzioli (2018).
5. The specific DG is not mentioned in order to respect the interviewee’s wish to remain entirely anonymous.
6. Practices confirmed by investigative reports that note also the direct involvement of Frontex forces and EU-supplied equipment, see among others Scavo (2021) and the reports published monthly by the BVMN (Available at: <https://www.borderviolence.eu/>).

7. The name “Linea d’Ombra” translates into “Shadow Line” and it perfectly describes the goal of this group to assist migrants who want to proceed on their journeys, and, therefore, want to remain “in the shadows” and unidentified by the authorities. They carry out their main activities in Piazza della Libertà, the square located in front of Trieste’s main train station.
8. BVMN (2021) reported the existence of so-called “quarantine camps” in which migrants were detained in the FVG region.
9. In 2020, the Italian Ministry of Interior Luciana Lamorgese visited Trieste and applauded the work of border and local authorities in the context of what she called a system of “readmissions” of migrants into Slovenia. Lamorgese then expressed the intention of further strengthening the presence of the military at the border (Ministero dell’Interno, 2020). This reference to “readmissions” draws on a bilateral agreement signed between Italy and Slovenia in 1996, which allows for the readmission of national and third-country citizens into Slovenian territory (ASGI, 2020) and which, therefore, contributes to inscribing the practices of pushbacks into the realm of formality and legality.
10. Tazzioli (2018: 4) refers to Michel Foucault’s notion of “infra-legal illegalisms” in her discussion of “crimes of solidarity” – a particularly apt characterisation of these entanglements.

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### Interview material

- Directorate-General at the European Commission, Employee. 2020. In-person interview. 29 January 2020. Brussels.
- Delegation of the European Union to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Representative. 2020. Online interview. 2 July 2020.
- Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG HOME), Policy officer. 2020. In-person interview. 28 January 2020, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, Rue du Luxembourg 46, Brussels.
- European Stability Initiative (ESI), Representative. 2020. Online interview. 28 January 2020.
- MEP. 2020. In-person interview. 28 January 2020. European Parliament, Rue Wiertz 60, Brussels.
- Linea d'Ombra. 2020. Online interview. 14 August 2020.
- Strada Si.Cura. 2020. Email interview. 17 August 2020.

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