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COVID-19 RESPONSES AND THE EUROPEAN BORDER REGIME IN CROATIA AND SERBIA: SPECTACULARIZING BORDERS AND SOVEREIGNTIES

Abstract

This article focuses on multiple bordering practices introduced in the context of the initial COVID-19 responses in Croatia and Serbia. These practices, often focused on the imposition of mobility control, were differently framed, executed and challenged in these two contexts and demonstrated a long-term restructuring of the European border regime at the gates of the EU. The paper outlines and contextualizes constant interplay and mutual stimulation of movement suppression and movement resilience in response to the new virus, blurring and sharpening borders, as seen from these two states at the political and geographical peripheries of Europe. Croatia and Serbia employed spectacularization and invisibilization of movement control, which steadily fostered the further compartmentalization of the population in both countries but with notable differences, especially regarding the control over unwanted migration toward the EU. In the period under discussion, borders were activated, imposed and challenged, exposing the changeability of relations between the EU border regime and the sovereign-nation states which comprise it. Different positions of Serbia and Croatia in the EU border regime also led to differences with regard to movement control, bordering, encampment and the repression exhibited toward people on the move. Old and new typologies of movement repression were tested and employed within the COVID-19 crisis framework, resulting in the further compartmentalization of societies and exclusions.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Croatia, European border regime, Serbia, sovereignty, bordering



Introduction

With the proclamation of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, a fertile ground was set for unprecedented investments in measures to mitigate the risks of spreading the new virus and reduce the consequences of becoming ill. These included not only the abundant financing of the medical and pharmaceutical sector but also that of securitarian technologies and human resources for movement control and surveillance. As the global emergency situation called for and justified the use of extraordinary measures, new and often frenetic and *ad hoc* forms of organizing societies and spaces were implemented. As in any crisis, the door was open for various “risk management actors and activities” to take initiative and act on the fringe of the law, deprived of thorough public scrutiny, resulting in legal and institutional changes with long-lasting consequences¹. States became laboratories, redefining threatening/dangerous groups and activities versus those exposed to threat/danger and probing new techniques to repress unwanted interactions. Crisis, discursively framed as a liminal phase between the two “normalcies,” stirred up the existing order allowing for new arrangements in the social and geopolitical structure.

This study² has discussed how the initial responses to the coronavirus pandemic manifested themselves as escalated, multiplied and often frantic bordering in the name of the fight against COVID-19 in Croatia and Serbia from the introduction of the lockdowns in mid-March 2020, to the beginning of May 2020, when the ban on “non-essential” movement and social activities was lifted in Croatia, and the curfew in Serbia ended, marking the closure of what was in many ways, an exceptional period. The article is guided by the question of how the pandemic stirred up the existing bordering order. In particular, we would like to discuss how this extraordinary situation revealed the volatility of social boundaries and categorizations, how it shed light on the communicational and performative aspect of imposing physical borders and immobilization, and how it showed unstable relations between the EU border regime and the sovereign nation states from which it is comprised. As an anchoring point, we turn to the repression of movement exhibited toward people on the move³, as the least privileged category in this regard and, by being pushed to legal limbo, it turned into a paragon of deprivation of rights, safeguards from state power and state violence.

¹ G. Campesi, *Immigrant Detention and the Double Logic of Securitization*, in: *The EU, Migration and the Politics of Administrative Detention*, M. Ceccorulli & N. Labanca (eds.), London 2014, pp. 145–166.

² This work has been supported by the German Academic Exchange Service under the project *The Balkans as a Double Transit Space*, the Croatian Science Foundation under the project *The European Irregularized Migration Regime at the Periphery of the EU: from Ethnography to Keywords* (IP-2019-04-6642) and the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation Serbia, (work engagement at the Institute of Ethnography SASA, agreement No. 451-03-47/2023-01/200173).

³ We use the phrase “people on the move” in line with the practice of contemporary migrant solidarity groups and networks and to avoid connotations attached to more common forms such as “refugees” and “migrants”, on the one hand and legislative normativity and reductiveness while referring to complex social realities on the other. A. Pijnenburg and C. Rijken, *Moving beyond Refugees and Migrants: Reconceptualising the Rights of People on the Move*, “Interventions”, 2021, R. 23, no 2, pp. 273–293, (online); <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1369801X.2020.1854107>, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2020.1854107>. When we want to accentuate the specific relationship of people on the move with the legal and administrative system of a state, we use more precise phrases.

We approach these questions through the analysis of bordering as spectacles of sovereignty and state power⁴. Our focus is on Croatia and Serbia, two neighboring states on the external border of the EU. The prevention of unwanted movement toward the EU is the foregrounded goal of border and migration control practices conducted by the states. However, these practices are often transformed into means for the achievement of other political and economic goals. At the gates of the EU known as the Balkan route⁵, but more precisely described as the Balkan circuit⁶, Croatia, as an EU member state, is situated on the inner side of the EU external border, and Serbia, a candidate state in the EU Accession Process, is on the outer side. Despite contrasting but complementary roles within the European border regime, the territories of these two states as well as their nation-state borders are crisscrossed and connected by clandestine migratory movements. The reactions of states on these and other movements in the initial time of the pandemic, and especially how they were staged, performed and communicated on the national and international level, is at the core of this study.

We situate our research within critical border regime studies, which implies a view of migration regulation not as an organized system linked with the actions of the state, powerful individuals or groups but as an assemblage of complex, variable, heterogeneous and often fragmented interventions and discourses of different “actors whose practices relate to each other but are not ordered in the form of a central logic or rationality”⁷. In such a framework, actors and migration control practices enter into different relationships with other actors and their practices who seek to avoid it, resulting in a constant interplay between movement regulation and movement agency. Furthermore, in this framework, statuses such as citizen, refugee, asylum seeker, foreign worker and resident fall among many interchangeable legal statuses in personal histories, disclosing themselves as objects of discursive framing, which can be manipulated in socio-political interactions. In this text, we analyze the spilling over of disenfranchisement and empowerment between different social categories conducted by the states and enabled by the pandemic context and the search for the emerging new topologies of movement and border transgression.

Starting from the premises of the border regime as a multi-dimensional and multi-scalar space of conflict and negotiation, we will employ, as formulated by Bernd Kasperek, Nicholas De Genova and Sabine Hess,

⁴ C. Heller, *De-confine Borders: Towards a Politics of Freedom of Movement in the Time of the Pandemic*, in: *Centre on Migration, Policy and Society Working Paper*, 2020, R. 147. <https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/2020/de-confine-borders-towards-a-politics-of-freedom-of-movement-in-the-time-of-the-pandemic-wp/> (date accessed: 10.10.2022). W. Brown, *Interview: A Worldwide Mutual Pact*, “the drift”, 2020, R 1, no 1. <https://www.thedriftingmag.com/a-worldwide-mutual-pact/> (date accessed: 10.10.2022).

⁵ M. Hamersak, S. Hess, M. Speer M. and M. Stojić Mitrović, *The Forging of the Balkan Route: Contextualizing the Border Regime in the EU Periphery*. “movements: Journal for Critical Migration and Border Regime Studies”, 2020, R. 5, no 1, pp. 9–29. (online): <https://movements-journal.org/issues/08.balkanroute/01.hamersak,hess,stojevic-mitrovic,speer-the-forging-of-the-balkan-route.pdf> (date accessed: 10.11.2022)

⁶ M. Stojić Mitrović and A. Vilenica, *Enforcing and Disrupting Circular Movement in an EU Borderscape: Housingscaping in Serbia*, “Citizenship Studies”, 2019, R. 23, no 6, pp. 540–558. (online): <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13621025.2019.1634368?journalCode=ccst20>, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2019.1634368>.

⁷ V. Tsianos, S. Hess and S. Karakayali, *Transnational Migration. Theory and Method of an Ethnographic Analysis of Border Regimes*, Brighton 2009, p. 2. “University of Sussex Working Paper”, Brighton 2009, R. Working paper No. 55, pp. 1–10.

a multi-methods approach including not only the stock methods of ethnography such as participant observation and interviews, but extending to discourse and policy analysis and genealogical reconstructions of the contemporary while approaching the ever-shifting constellation of the aggregate of opposing forces which is the border through praxeographic research at the time and site of its very emergence⁸.

Drawing from the analysis of legislation, published and internal reports, press releases, interviews, insights from formal and informal exchanges, in-person and remote, to which we refer later in the text, we aim to outline the peripheral border regime constellations and the escalated bordering that took place in this specific historical momentum as well as the long-term outcomes of border re-affirmations and border spectacles⁹ enacted in the name of combating yet another crisis.

After delineating the complementary and antagonistic positions of Croatia and Serbia in the European border regime, the article focuses on the national and supranational dimensions of the closing and controlling of nation-states' borders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and comparing it with the systems for the so-called fight against clandestine migration that developed in previous years. In the following chapter, the proliferation of internal borders and the transformation (fortification) of external and interiorized state borders in both countries aimed at suppressing the virus by stimulating bordering is discussed through the lenses of compartmentalization of societies enabled by the fostered divide between sick and healthy, citizens and others, dangerous and endangered ones, etc. In the next section, examples of practices which challenged state and by state introduced borders in the initial period of COVID-19 pandemic are examined as well as impacts of the stricter control of cross-border movements and the imposition of internal borders, social boundaries and differentiations within the nation-state's territory. The concluding chapter summarizes the discussion of the manifestation of state power through bordering and challenges to it.

Croatia and Serbia at the Gates of the EU

Croatia and Serbia are successor states of constitutive republics of the Social Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), which disintegrated into nation-states during bitter wars in the nineteen-nineties. Croatia became a member of the EU in 2013, while Serbia remains in negotiation or, more formally, the Accession Process. The inclusion of these states into the European border regime has been conducted by a number of programs and initiatives for more than two decades¹⁰. As has been discussed by many

⁸ B. Kasperek, N. De Genova and S. Hess, *Border Regime*, "Cultural Studies (New Keywords: Migration and Borders)", p. 70. 2014, R. 29, no 1, pp. 79–81. (online): <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09502386.2014.891630>, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2014.891630>.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 66.

¹⁰ V. Baričević, *Europske integracije i usvajanje europskih politika azilne zaštite u Hrvatskoj: prava osoba pod zaštitom i njihova integracija u društvo [European Integration and the Adoption of European Asylum Protection Policies in Croatia: the Rights of Persons under Protection and their Integration into Society]*. in: "Prvih šezdeset godina razvoja sustava azila u Hrvatskoj (s osvrtom na sustave azila u regiji [The First Sixty Years of The Development of The Asylum System in Croatia (With Reference to the Asylum Systems in the Region)]",

authors¹¹, the EU borderlands are zones where different movement restrictions apply and where the state and other actors often exercise extralegal measures over different categories of people, including legally unjustified encampment, violence and refoulement¹². The distinctive appearances of these measures in Croatia and Serbia create unequal border-scapes¹³, with specific but mutually supporting roles. While both function as the gates of the EU, Croatia represents an internal space, from which the unwanted people are repelled outside the EU. Serbia represents an outer space, an antechamber where people are forced to stay while trying to enter EU¹⁴.

Only recently, on January 1, 2023 did Croatia become a Schengen member state, after years of awaiting approval and working on fulfilling all the technical requirements¹⁵. It has become notorious for regularly conducting collective and, in some instances, extremely violent pushbacks of people on the move to neighboring non-EU countries, predominantly Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, another SFRY successor state¹⁶. By expelling people on the move regardless of their age, nationality, gender, and loud and clear asylum claims, Croatia reduces unwanted border crossings into the other EU states and proves its ability to control the EU external border, one of the crucial preconditions for joining the Schengen Area.

Serbia, a candidate state in the EU Accession Process, forms part of the so-called Western Balkans – a non-EU space in Europe surrounded by EU member states, across which people on the move circulate in search of an exit and to which are turned back in the case of unsuccessful entrance or stay in the EU. The Western Balkans have been functioning as a transnational buffer-zone¹⁷ for the unwanted movement toward the EU for decades. In exchange for political and economic support¹⁸, Serbia uses its own agencies to control

Drago Župarić-Ilijić (ed.), Zagreb 2013; M. Stojić Mitrović, N. Ahmetašević, B. Bezec and A. Kurnik. *Dark Sides of Europeanization: Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the European Border Regime*, Beograd 2020, / sites/default/files/publications/MITROVIC_Dark_Sides_of_EU_.pdf (date accessed: 10.10.2022).

¹¹ G. Campesi, *Policing Mobility Regimes: Frontex and the Production of the European Borderscape*, London 2021; M. Stojić Mitrović. *Evropski granični režim i eksternalizacija kontrole granica EU: Srbija na balkanskoj migracijskoj rutii* [The European Border Regime and the Externalization of the EU Border Control: Serbia on the Balkan Migration Route]. Beograd 2021a.

¹² Border Violence Monitoring Network, *The Black Book of Pushbacks – Volumes I & II* (online): <https://left.eu/issues/publications/black-book-of-pushbacks-volumes-i-ii/>; BCHR (Belgrade Centre for Human Rights), 2020, *Right to Asylum in the Republic of Serbia Periodic report for January – June 2020*, <http://azil.rs/en/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Periodic-Report-Right-to-Asylum-in-the-RS-January-June-2020.pdf> (date accessed: 10.10.2022).

¹³ C. Brambilla, *From Border as a Method of Capital to Borderscape as a Method for a Geographical Opposition to Capitalism*, “Bollettino Della Società Geografica Italiana Roma”, 2015, R. 8, no 3, pp. 393–402; G. Campesi, 2021, Ibidem.

¹⁴ M. Stojić Mitrović, N. Ahmetašević, B. Bezec and A. Kurnik, 2020. Ibidem, pp. 34–41.

¹⁵ MEPs back Croatia's Schengen accession. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20221107IPR49610/meps-back-croatia-s-schengen-accession> (date accessed 12.11.2022).

¹⁶ E. Bužinkić and M. Avon, *Pushback as a Technology of Crimmigration*, in: *Causes and Consequences of Migrant Criminalization*, N. Kogovšek Šalamon (ed.), Cham 2020, pp. 157–170.

¹⁷ S. Collinson, *Visa Requirements, Carrier Sanctions, “Safe Third Countries” and “Readmission”*: *The Development of an Asylum “Buffer Zone” in Europe*, “Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers”, 1996, R. 21, no 1, 76–90.

¹⁸ Up until the end of 2021, Serbia received 130 million EUR from the EU from 2015 for the reception system and 8 million for border control, European Union's support to Migration Management in the Republic of Serbia, <http://euinfo.rs/podrska-eu-upravljanju-migracijama/en/> (date accessed: 12.11.2022); European Union's

movement for the EU on its borders and its territory. Moreover, Serbia allows EU agencies, such as Frontex, and police units of various EU member states to directly conduct the control of movement while being physically present on Serbian territory¹⁹. Parallel with enabling external border control for the EU, Serbia has managed to present itself to the broader public as a welcoming or at least tolerating country for people from the Global South²⁰. However, Serbian migration management remains physical and superficial: people are kept in camps and pulled back from EU borders but are curtailed access to any administrative status which would enable legal stay and thus access to education, sufficient healthcare and work – they are held outside Serbian society.

Not only people on the move but also many citizens of Croatia and Serbia tend to emigrate to the wealthier EU member states²¹. While Croatian citizens are also EU nationals and therefore enjoy free entry, movement and more or less equal rights in other EU member states, citizens of Serbia do not. Serbian citizens have been able to enter EU member states without visas since 2009 but can stay there longer than three months and/or work only under certain restrictions and after obtaining special permissions, insurances and visas. Their stay depends on their relationship with the EU member state's institutions, employers or citizens (through work, education, marriage, etc.). Thousands of Serbian citizens are refused entry to the EU, seeking asylum in the EU as well or being expelled from the EU on an annual basis²².

By focusing our analysis on Croatia and Serbia, we strive to approach the EU regime of movement control from its periphery. Thus, we attempt to offer a decentralized perspective on the events and processes that marked the beginning of the pandemic and to accentuate the agency of peripheral actors who instrumentalize the repression of movement in everyday political and social life.

The Closing of State Borders and the Assertion of a (Supra)National Order

Although the first reactions to the proclamation of the pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020 were far from uniform, the majority of governments had closed their state borders by the end of March 2020, despite the common contemporary approach to the epidemic summarized by the WHO doctrine “One Health, One World,” which implies abstaining from closing borders and insisting on international col-

support to Migration Management in the Republic of Serbia, Marking five years of the European Union's Support to Serbia in Border Management, 9 November 2021, <http://euinfo.rs/podrska-eu-upravljanju-migracijama/en/marking-five-years-of-the-european-unions-support-to-serbia-in-border-management/> (date accessed: 12.11.2022).

¹⁹ M. Stojić Mitrović, 2021a, Ibidem; European Union's support to Migration Management in the Republic of Serbia, Marking five years of the European Union's Support to Serbia in Border Management, 9 November 2021.

²⁰ B. Beznec, M. Speer and M. Stojić Mitrović, *Governing the Balkan Route: Macedonia, Serbia and European Border Regime*, Beograd 2016.

²¹ Croatian bureau for statistics, Migration of population of Republic of Croatia, 2021, <https://podaci.dzs.hr/2022/en/29029> (date accessed: 12.11.2022); Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the council. Fourth report under the visa suspension mechanism, Brussels, 2021, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0602&from=EN> (date accessed: 12.11.2022).

²² Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, 2021, Ibidem.

laboration and harmonization²³. The situation was notably complex in Europe, where perplexing dynamics and geographies were at play, particularly in the “border-free” Schengen Area as a supranational but still nationally governed space in many aspects²⁴. Slovenia and Austria re-established and closed their borders with Italy on March 11, 2020, becoming the first countries to suspend free movement within the Schengen Area. Shortly afterwards, the other Schengen countries re-established their borders, with only a few inter-Schengen borders remaining unaffected²⁵. As a result, the main pillars of the European Union – free movement of goods and people – were suspended.

Croatia and Serbia participated in this “acceleration of the bordering of the world”²⁶. Croatia introduced a fourteen-day quarantine on March 9, 2020 for all who were coming from Italy, China, South Korea or Iran or had been there in the previous fourteen days, officially declared an epidemic on March 15, 2020, and four days later, imposed a temporary ban on crossing Croatian borders. On March 10, 2020, Serbia refused entrance to all foreigners traveling from Italy, Iran and some parts of China, South Korea and Switzerland. Five days later, it declared a state of emergency and the closure of its borders, with the exception of returning Serbian citizens and permanent residence holders. On March 20, 2020 Serbia declared a border closure for all passengers, apart from a very few defined as exceptions²⁷.

Thus, the Westphalian paradigm and, as Liisa Malkki named it, “the national order of things”²⁸ quickly prevailed in Europe and within the supranational framework of the EU. It was fostered by the resilient conception of state borders as defense lines – obstacles and barriers²⁹ – also against viruses, even though this virus had already been spreading inside the states’ territories. In fact, as highlighted by Wendy Brown, the idea of a virus that respects state borders is self-contradictory since “its failure to do so is the very definition of a pandemic”³⁰. Nevertheless, although closed borders provided some false assurance of controlling the spread, they, as Brown stated while implicitly extending her notion of waning sovereignty³¹, served “the important political function of treating the virus as if it invaded us from the outside and acting as if we are meeting that threat with sovereign power”³². Building upon Brown’s line of argumentation and focusing on unwanted migra-

²³ A. Delmas and D. Goeury, *Bordering the World in Response to Emerging Infectious Disease: The Case of SARS-CoV-2*, “Borders in Globalization Review”, 2020, R. 2, no 1, pp 12–13, <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-03083567/document> (date accessed: 10.10.2022).

²⁴ W. Walters, *Mapping Schengenland: Denaturalizing the Border*, “Environmental and Planning D: Society and Space”, 2002, R. 20, no 5, pp. 561–580.

²⁵ Updated: Temporary Internal Border Controls Reintroduced Across Schengen <https://www.schengenvi-sainfo.com/news/temporary-internal-border-controls-reintroduced-across-schengen/> (date accessed: 12.11.2022).

²⁶ A. Delmas and G. Goeury, 2020, *Ibidem*, p. 13.

²⁷ N. Lazić, V. Lazić and B. Kolarić B., *First Three Months of COVID-19 in Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia and Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina: Comparative Assessment of Disease Control Measures*, “Infektološki glasnik”, 2020, R. 40, no 2, pp. 43–49.

²⁸ L. Malkki, *Refugees and Exile: From “Refugee Studies” to the National Order of Things*, “Annual Review of Anthropology”, 1995, R. 24, pp. 495–523.

²⁹ S. Green. *A Sense of Border: The Story so Far*, in: *A Companion to Border Studies*, T.M. Wilson and H. Donnan (eds.), Chichester 2012, pp. 573–592.

³⁰ W. Brown, 2020, *Ibidem*.

³¹ W. Brown, *Walled States. Waning Sovereignty*, New York 2010.

³² W. Brown, 2020, *Ibidem*.

tion, Charles Heller highlights that border closures in this period had first of all a performative function which allowed states “the spectacular exercise of their sovereign power, even as the spread of the virus demonstrated their weakness and failures at so many other levels”³³. On the consequences of this symbolic and in regard to virus-spreading ineffective renationalization, Christian Wille and Florian Weber stress:

Reactivating national ordering prevents coordinated and uniform EU action, which is limited in the current situation anyway, since infection protection is the responsibility of the individual EU member states (Berrod, Wassenberg and Chovet 2020), and the European Commission can only submit proposals in favor of coordinated measures³⁴.

This performative aspect of exercising sovereign power in Serbia and Croatia was manifested in the mobilization of nation-state symbols, ranging from televised presidential addresses to sending the national army to the borders, as was the case in Serbia. This mobilization of the army at the borders had an interesting twist, as shown in one of many official photographs of the situation at the borders. Serbian soldiers guarding the border, in full combat readiness, had their guns directed inward, toward the territory of Serbia, and not outward, toward the neighboring states³⁵. Borders are actualized as instruments of internal control aimed at suppressing both exit from and entry into the territory of the state. Thus, in the COVID-19 context, parallelism of state borders and prison walls were exposed³⁶. Unlike the virus, which “attacks” from the outside, here residents were the potential elements of chaos lurking on the inside. Order inside the state is endangered by two agents and from two directions. Therefore, retaining the order had to be bold and swift; this took the form of declaring a state of emergency with curfews and rule by decree. In other words, the state of emergency was directed at protecting not only the nation but also the state itself from the risks posed by its citizens.

In some instances, it was not even the state but international alliances and standing that had to be re-affirmed through the application of measures or their exemption. Because Croatia is an EU member-state, the closure of its borders was regulated by the decision of the Croatian Civil Protection Headquarter³⁷, as well as the Conclusion of the European Commission on the need for the coordinated introduction of “**applying a travel restriction on non-essential travel from third countries into the EU+ area with immediate effect at all parts of the Schengen external borders**” (original emphasis)³⁸. Thus, in the case of Croatia as an EU

³³ C. Heller, 2020, *Ibidem*, p. 8.

³⁴ C. Wille and F. Weber, *Analyzing Border Geographies in Times of COVID-19*, 2020, p. 15. <https://www.melinapress.lu/read/analyzing-border-geographies-in-times-of-covid-19/section/29d7ad90-ff96-48c6-964f-ce89416e6c6e> (date accessed: 8.8.2022).

³⁵ Minister Vulin at the Batrovcima Border Crossing: The Serbian Armed Forces carry out all tasks in the state of emergency, <http://www.mod.gov.rs/eng/15180/ministar-vulin-na-batrovcima-vojska-srbije-izvrsava-sve-postavljene-zadatke-u-vanrednom-stanju-15180> (date accessed: 12.11.2022).

³⁶ D. Newman, *Contemporary Research Agendas in Border Studies: An Overview*, in: *Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies*, D. Wastl-Water (ed.), London 2011, p. 43.

³⁷ Stožer civilne zaštite Republike Hrvatske, Odluka o privremenoj zabrani prelaska preko graničnih prijelaza Republike Hrvatske, https://civilna-zastita.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/CIVILNA%20ZA%20C5%A0TITA/PDF_ZA%20WEB/Odluka%20-%20privremena%20zabrana%20prelaska%20preko%20grani%20C4%20Dnih%20prijelaza%20RH.pdf (date accessed: 12.11.2022). Summary in English: <http://www.mvep.hr/en/info-servis/press-releases/32735.html> (date accessed: 12.11.2022).

³⁸ European Commission, Communication COVID-19: Temporary Restriction on Non-Essential Travel to the EU, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0115&from=EN> (March 8, 2021)

member located on the external borders, the closure of borders was not solely an act of mobilizing the sovereign power of the nation state over its territory. In Serbia, the pandemic was also recognized as an opportunity to strengthen multilateral and supranational relations. As a part of the relaxation of their anti-epidemic measures, Serbia considered lifting the entrance ban for the citizens of the so-called “Open Balkan” (previously known as the “Mini-Schengen”), the internal name for the project of the regional liberalization of the movement of goods and persons between three of the Western Balkans states, Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia³⁹. Moreover, the reception of foreign aid became an arena for sending political messages: while Chinese and, to a lesser extent, Russian aid was publicly promoted, the aid coming from the EU was not, leading to a public explanation/excuse by the Serbian president in order to calm down the displeasure in the EU, which is actually Serbia’s largest trade partner and donor of financial aid⁴⁰. This suggests that, despite focusing on sovereign power, the obstacles to the virus were placed at the supranational level in parallel with the virus taking over the role of an indicator and catalyst of geopolitical alliances.

Bordering conducted in response to the new virus was entangled not only in performances of sovereign power, geopolitical interplay and constellations but also in the national and supranational apparatus developed to control (unwanted) migration. As Adriene Delmas and David Goeury formulated, responses to the pandemic were prepared by “border systems for the management of human beings,” and they were in many instances “replicating models that have been circulating internationally for the past few years”⁴¹. Preparation has been performed in recent decades in the securitized bordering framework driven by the obsession of states in the Global North with the so-called fight against terrorism and clandestine migration. This has been followed by the ongoing militarization of border control, enormous investments in digital and physical control devices, constant multimodal surveillance, “filtering” systems and checks and re-checks, and the Schengen Area has become one of the emblematic spaces⁴². In fact, the first responses to the pandemic with mass border closures were similar to the responses to the breakthrough of mobility in 2015 and the “long summer of migration,”⁴³ in the aftermath of which state borders were quickly re-established and securitized even within the European Union as well as being walled and visibly militarized at its outskirts⁴⁴.

(date accessed: 12. 11. 2022). EU+ acronym refers to all Schengen EU member states (including Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus and Romania), the four Schengen Associated States, and voluntarily also Ireland and the United Kingdom.

³⁹ S. Rapaić, *Mali Šengen’ kao mogućnost nove regionalne ekonomske integracije [Small Schengen as an Opportunity for a New Regional Integration]*. “Međunarodni problem”, 2020, R. 72, no 3, pp. 566–594; Srbija 1. juna otvara granice sa četiri države, negativan test uslov za ulazak, <https://www.021.rs/story/Info/Srbija/243118/Srbija-1-juna-otvara-granice-sa-četiri-drzave-negativan-test-uslov-za-ulazak.html> (date accessed: 13.11.2022).

⁴⁰ Vučić: Korona virus diplomatija neće skrenuti Srbiju sa puta ka EU, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-korona-virus-diplomatija-neze-skrenuti-srbiju-sa-puta-ka-eu/> (date accessed: 13.11.2022).

⁴¹ A. Delmas and G. Goeury, 2020, *Ibidem*, pp. 16–17.

⁴² L. Karamanidou, B. Kasperek and S. Hess, *Border Management and Migration Control: Comparative Report*, in: *Respond Working Papers Global Migration Consequences and Responses*, 2020, p. 46, <https://respondmigration.com/wp-blog/border-management-migration-control-comparative-report> (date accessed: 10.10.2022); W. Walters, 2002, *Ibidem*.

⁴³ B. Kasperek and M. Speer, *Of Hope. Hungary and the Long Summer of Migration*, 2015, <http://border-monitoring.eu/ungarn/2015/09/of-hope-en/> (date accessed: 10.10.2022).

⁴⁴ B. Beznec, M. Speer and M. Stojić Mitrović, 2016, *Ibidem*; E. Bužinkić and M. Hameršak, eds, *Formation and Disintegration of the Balkan Refugee Corridor: Camps, Routes and Borders in Croatian Context*, Zagreb

In essence, beginning with the filtering of new arrivals from designated risk areas by banning their entrance or by prescribing medical examinations or quarantine and then advancing to almost completely blocking the borders for all travelers, Croatia and Serbia applied measures that mimicked the control of the movement of people on the move envisioned and put into practice by strategic documents of the EU, for example by the European Agenda for Migration (2015–2020)⁴⁵. The preparedness of the European border regime for another crisis or, to put it more justly, its permanent crisis mode⁴⁶ was highlighted in interviews with employees of the Croatian so-called transit reception centers for foreigners (i.e. detention centers) in which the use of protective aids (masks and disinfectants), and protocols (medical examinations and distancing), was regular practice. One interviewee stated: “This, now, is an emergency situation, but we had no need for some special adjustments to it. We are careful a little bit more, but for us this is a regular situation.” In fact, the overlapping between bordering in pandemics and bordering in borderlands could be traced back in time. One example of this, the Austrian Sanitary Cordon, which had been established and maintained in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries along the borders with the Ottoman Empire, partly along borders between today’s Croatia and Serbia, highlights the cozy embeddedness of sanitary control mechanisms into militarized migration regimes and the easy transfusion of techniques and practices between these two domains. Moreover, the Austrian Cordon was enabled precisely by structures and personnel established within the so-called Military Border (*Militärgrenze*)⁴⁷.

The Proliferation of Borders and Compartmentalization of Society

State borders are not only spatialized demarcations between (supra-)sovereign political collectivities but also manifestations of asymmetrical socio-political relations that can infiltrate the state’s territory in different ways. Identity and movement controls to estimate whether someone has the right to access a space or simply be somewhere are conducted all over the state’s territory. One such example represents a type of border control by which people on the move are searched for by checking personal vehicles, buses and trains on both Serbian and Croatian roads. With the COVID-19 induced lockdown and the imposition of radical movement restrictions, crossing internal borders such as borders between municipalities and provinces in Croatia⁴⁸, and even going beyond a certain radius from places

and Munich 2018; E. Guild, S. Carrera, L. Vosyliūte, K. Groenendijk, E. Brouwer, D. Bigo, J. Jeandesboz and M. Martin-Mazé. *Internal Border Controls in the Schengen Area: Is Schengen Crisis-proof?*, 2016, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/571356/IPOL_STU%282016%29571356_EN.pdf (date accessed: 10.10.2022)

⁴⁵ A European agenda on migration, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-09/communication_on_the_european_agenda_on_migration_en.pdf (date accessed: 13.11.2022).

⁴⁶ New Keywords Collective, *Europe/Crisis: New Keywords of “the Crisis” in and of “Europe”*, “Near Futures Online: Europe at a Crossroads”, 2016, R. 1, http://nearfuturesonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/New-Keywords-Collective_11.pdf (date accessed: 10.10.2022).

⁴⁷ G E. Rothenberg, *Austrian Sanitary Cordon and the Control of the Bubonic Plague: 1710–1871*. “Journal of History of Medicine”, 1973, R. 28, no 1, pp. 15–23.

⁴⁸ The decision of prohibition of leaving the place of residence and permanent residence in the Republic of Croatia https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2020_03_35_737.html (date accessed: 13.11.2022).

of residence in Serbia⁴⁹, started to resemble the crossing of state borders. Approval of identity and the “right” to be somewhere was demanded, according to always-changing decrees. Furthermore, people were surrounded by numerous new, less severe borders used for public order. These borders were indicated by, for example, plastic tape lines prohibiting entrance to playgrounds and coffee terraces or as lines/dots glued to the floor to mark safe distances between people in a queue.

In March and April 2020, special permits were needed to cross from one municipality to another in Croatia; these were usually checked on the roads between municipalities⁵⁰. In Serbia, control could be performed at any location: the ban on movement was regulated both on a timescale, via a curfew activated in Serbia as part of the officially proclaimed state of emergency, on an age scale (persons older than sixty-five were prohibited from going out at all), and in relation to the distance of the location where the persons encountered authority from the place of residence (for example, taking pets out during the curfew was allowed only within 200 m from the place of residence)⁵¹. In other words, movement was allowed only within certain times and/or radii from home, and the rules were applied differently, depending on the social category. Breaching a (self)isolation/quarantine measure or entering into someone else’s place of (self)isolation/quarantine, as well as leaving the prescribed radius of movement in Serbia, became a misdemeanor. Here, the borders revealed themselves as relative and relational, depending on the person and their location (residential or self-isolation address). They became literally mobile, situational, individualized and modeled by the movement of people. Thus, in a pandemic lockdown, the boundaries demarcating personal space (body, apartment, etc.) became borders subjected to the process of external control by the (state or municipal) authorities; while the control seemingly aimed at one social group (those who are old, do not live in a certain radius or do not possess movement permission), it was applied to all – everyone’s documents were to be checked, although not with the same consequences. Moreover, in Serbia, the presence of armed military personnel in the streets, in front of hospitals, post offices, banks, geriatric centers, etc., became normalized⁵². Exactly the omnipresent and seemingly more pertinent omni-perceptible militarization of public spaces became an indicator of the state of emergency and proliferated borders.

In short, bordering during the first responses to the pandemic was followed by (hyper)bordering inside the state territories and the proliferation of all kinds of borders (sanitary, social, medical etc.) aimed at suppressing movement, minimalizing social contact,

⁴⁹ Odluka o ublažavanju mere ograničenja kretanja tokom vanrednog stanja, <https://www.paragraf.rs/propsi/odluka-o-ublazavanju-mere-ogranicenja-kretanja-tokom-vanrednog-stanja.html> (date accessed: 13.11.2022).

⁵⁰ For example, special permissions issued by the Serbian Ministry of the interior were needed for moving outside the home in certain periods: Detaljno uputstvo privrednim subjektima za izdavanje dozvola za kretanje radnika u noćnim satima, <https://www.ekapija.com/news/2827353/detaljno-uputstvo-privrednim-subjektima-za-izdavanje-dozvola-za-kretanje-radnika-u-nocnim> (date accessed: 13.11.2022).

⁵¹ Korona virus u Srbiji: Mesec dana vanrednog stanja <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-52298337> (date accessed: 13.11.2022).

⁵² Photo archive of the Serbian Ministry of defense: Serbian Armed Forces are securing border crossings, migrant centres and hospitals, <http://www.mod.gov.rs/eng/15766/vojska-srbije-obezbedjuje-granicne-prelaze-prihvatne-centre-i-bolnice-15766> (date accessed: 13.11.2022); The engagement of the Serbian Armed Forces in the state of emergency, <http://www.mod.gov.rs/eng/15176/angazovanje-vojske-srbije-u-vanrednom-stanju-15176> (date accessed: 13.11.2022).

and isolating those infected and/or in danger of becoming infected. People, regions, living and working spaces were locked down if assessed as (potentially) contagious or especially vulnerable to infection, while working from home became the norm for many professions. Schools went online, leaving behind pupils if without electricity or internet, or in difficult family circumstances. The processes of selective movement control only targeting people on the move, which existed before the pandemic, got blurred in the mass of movement restrictions enforced to prevent the spread of the pandemic, only to occasionally become revealed in a more strict and brutal way than before. While the living conditions in camps in Croatia remained relatively unchanged during the lockdown, there were exceptions, such as limiting the access of civil society organizations to the camps, and excesses, such as starting to construct a fence around a camp in Zagreb⁵³. In Serbia, strict movement restrictions became a reality for people on the move, even before the official declaration of the state of emergency in mid-March 2020. The pandemic was used for the justification and escalation of repression. The virus has quickly exposed how different groups living in the same territory “can have radically different experiences with state and institutional power” (Rouse 2021, 365)⁵⁴.

The “global setback” of the pandemic did not affect the resilience of the repressive movement control of unwanted migration. On the contrary, the opacities, fears and understatements settled the discursive ground for its justification and acceptance. In the late winter of 2020, the militarization of migration control, marked by the use of force and weapons against people on the move on the Greek Turkish border, was not only tolerated but supported and commended at the European level⁵⁵. Subsequently, Serbia and other countries of “the shield of the EU” understood that they were given the green light to heighten their movement repression⁵⁶. The EU, as formulated by the Serbian Minister of Defense “for the first time said ‘we don’t want you, don’t try to come illegally, there is a way to do it.’ [...] The Union is finally trying to take a united position and that will make life much easier for us who are not members of the European Union”⁵⁷. This unconcealed acknowledgment of Serbia’s subjugation to the will of the EU with regard to migration

⁵³ WELCOME TO PRISON: We are treated like animals in the zoo!!!, http://komunal.org/teksti/542-welcome-to-prison-we-are-treated-like-animals-in-the-zoo?fbclid=IwAR20Y3VIB_eGrb_TOIJ0jWMxBrlsCKpm0-GZMyENNOOdttdGDMRwtzpcMFvI (date accessed: 13.11.2022). After public transport was terminated within the framework of anti-pandemic measures, the Zagreb camp located on the very edge of the city was further isolated; however, our collocutors did not perceive this isolation as targeting asylum seekers particularly.

⁵⁴ C.M. Rouse, *Necropolitics versus Biopolitics: Spatialization, White Privilege, and Visibility during Pandemic*. “Cultural Anthropology”, 2021, R. 32, no 1, pp. 360–367.

⁵⁵ Greece/Turkey: Asylum-seekers and migrants killed and abused at borders, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/04/greece-turkey-asylum-seekers-and-migrants-killed-and-abused-at-borders/> (date accessed: 13.11.2022). Despite breaches of the international law, EU leaders praised Greek “*handling of the situation at the external borders*,” Remarks by President von der Leyen at the joint press conference with Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Prime Minister of Greece, Andrej Plenković, Prime Minister of Croatia, President Sassoli and President Michel, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_20_380 (date accessed: 13.11.2022).

⁵⁶ EU chief says Greece is Europe’s shield in migrant crisis, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51721356> (date accessed: 13.11.2022); Greece is “Europe’s shield” in migrant crisis, says EU chief von der Leyen on a visit to the Turkish border, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/03/03/greece-migrant-crisis-is-an-attack-by-turkey-on-the-eu-austria> (date accessed: 13.11.2022).

⁵⁷ Vulin: Ukoliko Vučić naredi Vojska Srbije će zatvoriti državnu granicu, <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/vulin-ukoliko-vucic-naredi-vojska-srbije-ce-zatvoriti-drzavnu-granicu/> (date accessed: 13.11.2022).

management indicates that the goal of migration management at the periphery is not to govern movement per se; it is an instrument for achieving a whole array of political and economic benefits, and it functions as a political statement. COVID-19 provided a welcomed crisis context to facilitate the radical change in the Serbian migration policy, which endorsed, merged with and got energized by anti-pandemic measures. With the declaration of the state of emergency and publication of an official decree⁵⁸, people on the move in Serbia were formally forbidden to leave the camps and also to be outside the camps. The police conducted raids, took people from the streets and squats and transferred them to already overcrowded camps⁵⁹.

In Serbia, furthermore, asylum as such was *de facto* suspended⁶⁰, meaning that the already largely dysfunctional system stopped working altogether and cut off any possibility for people on the move to escape the notorious Serbian administrative limbo⁶¹. In mid-March, the Belgrade Asylum Office informed NGOs that they had canceled all scheduled procedural activities because of the epidemiological situation and the government's anti-pandemic measures, which resulted in there being no expressions of intention to apply for asylum in April⁶². The pandemic provided the setting for Serbia to reorganize the display of the state, its territory and its borders, not as an agent engaged in outsourced movement control for the EU, but as a sovereign⁶³. Camps scattered across Serbia became dense, punctiform, unmonitorable internal zones, enabling the direct arbitrary and uncontrollable rule of state officials over people on the move. Specifically, unlike the camps in the neighboring states, those in Serbia – where state officials boasted for years that their facilities were open and liberal concerning movement in and out⁶⁴ underwent radical changes in this period and were turned into places of detention. With control of unwanted movement

⁵⁸ Odluka o privremenom ograničavanju kretanja tražilaca azila i iregularnih migranata, <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SIGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/odluka/2020/32/1/reg> (date accessed: 13.11.2022).

⁵⁹ M. Stojić Mitrović, *Border Spectacles and COVID-19: From Invisibility to Forced Encampment of People on the Move in Serbia*. “Anthropological Theory Commons”, 2021b, <https://www.at-commons.com/2021/07/29/border-spectacles-and-COVID-19-from-invisibility-to-forced-encampment-of-people-on-the-move-in-serbia/> (date accessed: 10.10.2022).

⁶⁰ ECRE (European Council for Refugees and Exiles), *Information Sheet 28 May 2020: COVID-19 Measures Related to Asylum and Migration Across Europe*, 2020, p. 7, <https://www.ecre.org/information-sheet-28-may-2020-covid-19-measures-related-to-asylum-and-migration-across-europe/> (date accessed: 10.10.2022).

⁶¹ M. Stojić Mitrović and A. Vilenica, 2019, *Ibidem*.

⁶² BCHR, 2020, *Ibidem*, p. 16.

⁶³ The narrative for the public was that camps were closed in order to prevent people on the move from becoming infected, to detain them for their own good, while according to the official decree they were closed “to prevent the uncontrolled movement of persons who may be carriers of viruses.” Odluka o privremenom ograničavanju kretanja tražilaca azila i iregularnih migranata, *Ibidem*. When the formal state of emergency and lockdowns ended in Serbia at the beginning of May, the camps were not opened, and people on the move were not released. A special order of the Serbian Minister of Health enabled the authorities to keep them in the camps for an additional eight days. Initiation of the constitutional review procedure was needed to dismiss this order, BCHR, 2020, *Ibidem*; Prestala da važi Uredba kojom je ograničeno kretanje migranata i izbeglica u kampovima, <https://www.azilsrbija.rs/prestala-da-vazi-uredba-kojom-je-ograniceno-kretanje-migranata-i-izbeglica-u-kampovima/> (date accessed: 13.11.2022). Months after the end of the state of emergency, movement in and out of camps remained restricted: Klikaktiv – Centar za razvoj socijalnih politika, “Entry and leave camp permits”, <https://www.facebook.com/klikaktiv/photos/a.969835943078026/350635042942652/?type=3&theater> (date accessed: 13.11.2022).

⁶⁴ Asylum and Reception Centers, <https://kirs.gov.rs/eng/asylum/asylum-and-reception-centers> (date accessed: 13.11.2022).

toward the EU symbolically concentrated on these focal points and with occasional raids in border areas and Belgrade to catch people and bring them to the camps, the state re-acquisitioned sovereignty over the rest of its territory, its population, and its borders.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided justification for Serbia to transform and fortify state borders and reframe the role of the EU in it. With a decree published during the lockdown in April, the state appropriated privately owned land near the borderlines with North Macedonia and Bulgaria, reconceptualizing the state border as a belt and not a line as before⁶⁵. Even though this transformation was envisioned by the strategies of Integrated Border Management, adopted in Serbia in its EU Accession Process, their implementation started in the backdrop of a crisis, framed as a decision of sovereign state officials and not as a demand of the EU. This dynamic portrayal of the roles of Serbia and the EU in relation to primacy over the control of movement was marked by the spectacularization of nation-state sovereignty and the invisibilization of the borderwork conducted for the EU.

Challenging Borders and Border Closures

Paradoxically, the repression of movement during the initial period of the COVID-19 pandemic posed a challenge to borders by fostering new forms of exchanges between people on the move and the general population. Unlike pre-COVID-19 times, voices surfaced contrasting the official interpretations, even voices from the camps, especially in Serbia⁶⁶. In fact, online activities and connections between people on the move and local and transnational activists intensified in the initial period of the pandemic. Incarcerated in the heavily guarded camps in Serbia and facing persecution in the system which overwhelmingly illegalized their movement, people on the move found social media and digital communication to be a window out and a route for action and change. For the first time, the glimpses into their everyday lives in the highly precarious and extremely violent context of flight at the peripheries of the EU reached the public beyond professionals from humanitarian and securitarian industries and private contacts. Photos and videos were filmed and shared by people on the move with the idea of alarming viewers and condemning the dreadful conditions at the borders and in the camps. One such example of this represents a video shared with the public by minors themselves, through which the public became aware of the horrendous treatment of minors in the Serbian Bogovada asylum center, where the guards violently beat them⁶⁷. Disturbing personal footage of a brutally beaten man, presumably pushed back from Croatia to Bosnia and Herzegovina, filmed by people on the

⁶⁵ On April 25, 2020: “the Serbian Government brought a conclusion which stipulates temporary occupation of land, which is possessed by legal and physical subjects, near the border lines with North Macedonia and Bulgaria. The goal of this measure is to prevent spreading of the infectious disease COVID-19 [...], and especially mass unauthorized crossing of the state border away from the official border-crossing.” Uredba o merama za vreme vanrednog stanja, <https://www.propisi.net/uredba-o-merama-za-vreme-vanrednog-stanja/> (date accessed: 13.11.2022).

⁶⁶ Pandemic: instead of soap, police beatings!, <https://transbalkankasolidarnost.home.blog/umjesto-sapuna-policijske-batine> (date accessed: 13.11.2022).

⁶⁷ BCHR Files Criminal Report against Guards for Violence against Unaccompanied Children in the Bogovada Asylum Centre, <http://www.bgcentar.org.rs/bgcentar/eng-lat/bchr-files-criminal-report-against-guards-for-violence-against-unaccompanied-children-in-the-bogovada-asylum-centre/> (date accessed: 13.11.2022).

move and posted on social media at the end of March 2020, was analyzed in the following months and confirmed to be a video document of an extremely violent chain pushback⁶⁸.

Although border closures related to the COVID-19 pandemic felt universal and almost complete, many state borders “remained open to individuals deemed ‘desirable’ in the pandemic context, and for the movement of goods”⁶⁹. Despite the propagated and almost totally accepted official imperative to hermetically close state borders, in practice, they functioned more like a membrane than a barrier⁷⁰, while exclusion was manifested as selection⁷¹. In concordance with political and economic priorities, border closures had a plethora of exceptions in Serbia and Croatia. An example of this is the fact that with some differences in timing, both states allowed their respective citizens to cross the border for return or repatriation. Citizens of Croatia and Serbia working or staying abroad suddenly faced the unknown disease, the looming loss of jobs, the revocation of their legal status, an inability to access health care, or simply wanted to reunite with their families. They rushed back to Croatia and Serbia, fearing that the borders would completely close. Unclear conditions and modalities of repatriation, with Serbia being facing mass arrivals of its citizens and Croatia organizing repatriation missions with humanitarian vigor⁷², added to the bewildering approaches and procedures at the borders. This caused citizens and legal residents to become subjected to the border spectacles⁷³ that were otherwise reserved for “illegal” crossings and humanitarian borders⁷⁴. News reports about families separated because of the imposition of a new entry procedures, endless waiting, overcrowded border-crossings and the call for or distribution of basic supplies (food and water) were just some of what Croatian returnees faced with the new border regulation in Croatia⁷⁵. In Serbia, some of the camps that accommodate people on the move (official transit-reception centers) were

⁶⁸ Video Documents Illegal Refugee Pushbacks in Croatia, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/croatia-video-documents-illegal-refugee-pushbacks-a-294b128d-4840-4d6b-9e96-3f879b0e69af> (date accessed: 13.11.2022).

⁶⁹ S. Sekalala and B. Rawson, *Navigating the Paradoxes of Selective COVID-19 Border Closures*. “Border Criminologies”, 2020, <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2020/07/navigating> (date accessed: 10.10.2022).

⁷⁰ D. Papadopoulos, N. Stephenson and V. Tsianos, *Escape Routes: Control and Subversion in the Twenty-first Century*, London 2008.

⁷¹ W. Walters, *Europe’s Borders*, in: *Handbook of European Studies*, C. Rumford (ed.). London 2009, pp. 485–505.

⁷² ⁷² We let in 400,000 of our people from abroad, now the biggest hotspots are there, I feel like crying: President on corona epicenters in Serbia, <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/drustvo/aktuelno.290.html:856088-Pustili-smo-400000-nasih-ljudi-iz-inostranstva-sad-su-tamo-najveca-zarista-dodje-mi-da-placem-Predsednik-opicentrima-korone-u-Srbiji> (date accessed: 13.11.2022). Large numbers of Serbian citizens coming back mostly from EU member states can be attributed to the precarious status of workers from the so-called Western Balkan states in the EU, “Too late” to halt Serbia’s demographic disaster, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/24/too-late-to-halt-serbias-demographic-disaster/> (date accessed: 13.11.2022). Croatian and Serbian embassies all over the world supported or organized returns of their nationals, Foreign Service working tirelessly on assisting and repatriating Croatian nationals, <https://mvcp.gov.hr/press-22794/foreign-service-working-tirelessly-on-assisting-and-repatriating-croatian-nationals/196668> (date accessed: 13.11.2022).

⁷³ N. De Genova, *Spectacles of Migrant “Illegality”: The Scene of Exclusion, the Obscene of Inclusion*, “Ethnic and Racial Studies”, 2013, R. 36, no 7, pp. 1180–1198.

⁷⁴ W. Walters, *Foucault and Frontiers: Notes on the Birth of the Humanitarian Border*, in: *Governmentality. Current Issues and Future Challenges*, Bröckling, S. Krassman and T. Lemke (eds.), London 2011, 138.

⁷⁵ Ogromne gužve na granici Hrvatske i Slovenije “Čekamo u autobusu od 10 sati sinoć, ne možemo nikuda. Svi smo umorni i gladni...”, <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/ogromne-guzve-na-granici-hrvatske-i-slov>

reorganized into reception, and *de facto* detention centers for Serbian citizens returning from EU member states *en masse*, fearing the loss of jobs and thus the grounds for legal residence and health insurance. For only a short period, state practices of “care” spilled from the area reserved for outsiders, or unwanted migrants heading towards the EU, to insiders – citizens of the country temporarily residing abroad. Distinctions between protecting one’s own population and endangering others were once again blurred.

According to top Serbian officials, 400,000 people came into Serbia in March 2020 in a matter of days⁷⁶. Leading politicians framed this migration as the main source of the virus spread and described returnees as disloyal nationals and abusers of the Serbian free-of-charge health care system. The president of Serbia publicly “told them not to come” because it would be “our end”⁷⁷. As an employee of the Tovarnik detention center in Croatia, we interviewed exemplified referring to a case of a Serbian citizen who was temporary transferred to a detention center after being released from a Croatian prison, Serbia “did not want to take him in. They did not want to take in their own citizens.”

Returnees, encamped in former centers for people on the move, complained about bad conditions, cold, dirt and smell⁷⁸. This policy was abandoned within a couple of days, and people on the move were sent back to the transit-reception centers. In a twist which indicates an easy transgression of aspects from one social category to another in the right circumstances, a newly established campsite on the border with Croatia that immobilized returnees⁷⁹ was later briefly used to accommodate unaccompanied children on the move in an attempt to ease overcrowded camps. This was one of the rare cases where the state more closely linked two categories – people on the move and returning Serbian residents – and subjected them to the same repression of movement, encampment and discursive framing as a threat to the rest of the population. Both people on the move in Serbia, and Serbian citizens in the EU, were framed as agents of unwanted migration in the national context and Serbia had to, unwillingly, accept their presence.

At first glance, the pandemic, with its chaotic, multilayered and complex bordering and movement blockages, generalized the experience of irregularized migrants, in other words, those at the bottom of the global mobility hierarchy: otherwise privileged citizens felt a lack of freedom, the repression of movement, increased document control and insecurity⁸⁰. Being deprived of freedom of movement, free interactions with other people, access to services, being forced to stay inside, being only allowed to move in specified times and in specific spaces, not knowing how the situation would develop, or when and how the

[enije-cekamo-u-autobusu-od-10-sati-sinoc-ne-mozemo-nikuda-svi-smo-umorni-i-gladni-10088437](#) (date accessed: 13.11.2022).

⁷⁶ We let in 400,000 of our people from abroad, now the biggest hotspots are there, I feel like crying: President on corona epicenters in Serbia, *Ibidem*.

⁷⁷ Vučić’s fear management, <https://www.dw.com/bs/vu%C4%8Di%C4%87ev-menad%C5%BEment-straha/a-52898973> (date accessed: 13.11.2022).

⁷⁸ Citizens accommodated in the Reception Center complain about the conditions, <https://www.subotica.com/vesti/gradjani-smesteni-u-prihvatni-centar-negoduju-zbog-uslova-id37560.html> (date accessed: 13.11.2022).

⁷⁹ A camp for returnees from abroad without residence in Serbia opened in Morović near Šid (PHOTO), <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/u-morovicu-kod-sida-otvoren-kamp-za-povratnike-iz-inostranstva-bez-prebivalista-u-srbiji/> (date accessed: 13.11.2022).

⁸⁰ A. Delmas and G. Goeur, 2020, *Ibidem*, p. 17; C. Heller, 2020. *Ibidem*.

right to be somewhere would be revoked, could be seen as the basis for developing feelings of shared experiences with people on the move. However, even though the experiences could seem similar, on a more profound level, they were not and did not result in increased solidarity. By contrast, the spiraling of the anti-migrant discourse occurred in the beginning of the pandemic⁸¹, especially in Serbia, where the pandemic, state of emergency and deprivation of free movement of the citizens merged with the so-called great replacement theory in the narratives of the hate groups on social media⁸².

Border crossings also remained officially open for commercial transit, cargo transport, medical workers, diplomats, police officers and other “essential travelers,” as they were soon named⁸³. The Conclusion of the European Commission about the closure of external borders listed “persons in need of international protection or for other humanitarian reasons” among “essential travelers.” However, they were not listed in the corresponding national Croatian decree on “essential travelers”⁸⁴. However, their movement was not completely halted, and many persons stuck at the gates of the EU continued to challenge the borders by trying to cross them on foot. Some people on the move did indeed reach the EU in these first months of the pandemic, disturbing the impression of global immobilization. According to an employee of the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migrations, the main state institution that manages migration inside the state’s territory, when some of the residents managed to reach the Netherlands, workers in the state-run camps sarcastically commented that COVID-19 made moving without passports easier than moving with them.

According to one report about the situation in Belgrade at the beginning of the pandemic, many people on the move who were waiting in the Serbian capital for their chance to clandestinely cross the Croatian border “said they would try to use the lockdown to go to ‘the game’”⁸⁵, i.e., a clandestine border crossing⁸⁶. It seems that some of them managed to reach Italy in less than twenty-four hours, thanks to disorganized public services, including the police. However, in some respects, the unregularized border crossings became even more difficult than before. For example, more diligent control triggered by anti-pandemic measures disturbed the established support infrastructures, which consisted of people and places engaged in fostering transit movement. The use of public transport in Croatia for people on the move became even riskier. Later, when public transport was terminated, it became impossible for people on the move to use this means of transportation and they

⁸¹ J. Reynolds, *Fortress Europe, Global Migration & the Global Pandemic*, “AJIL Unbound”, 2020, R. 114, p. 342–348, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-journal-of-international-law/article/fortress-europe-global-migration-the-global-pandemic/72D9CB9397CD295DE477F96B70DD2D22> (date accessed: 13.11.2022).

⁸² M. Stojić Mitrović, N. Ahmetašević, B. Bezec and A. Kurnik, 2020, Ibidem, pp. 64–66.

⁸³ <https://www.paragraf.rs/koronavirus/strucni-komentari/status-stranih-drzavljana-tokom-vanrednog-stanja.html> and https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2020_03_32_714.html (date accessed: 10.10.2022).

⁸⁴ European Commission, Communication COVID-19: Temporary Restriction on Non-Essential Travel to the EU; Stožer civilne zaštite Republike Hrvatske, Odluka o privremenoj zabrani prelaska preko graničnih prijelaza Republike Hrvatske.

⁸⁵ INFO PARK weekly report. 2020. 10–16 March 2020 #9 (private archive).

⁸⁶ C. Minca and J. Collins, *The Game. Or, “the Making of Migration” along the Balkan Route*. “Political Geography”, 2021, 91, pp. 1–11, (online:) <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S096262982101505?via%3Dihub>, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102490>.

became more dependent on smugglers. The higher demand for smuggling services led to increased prices in the days preceding the official declaration of the pandemic⁸⁷.

In comparison to the radical reduction in airline traffic in March and April – with more than 90% fewer flights than the previous year⁸⁸ – the reduction in the number of clandestine border crossings in the same period seems much less radical⁸⁹. In Serbia, the spectacularized immobility of people on the move and their visible separation from the rest of society through encampment⁹⁰ was contrasted with daily new arrivals of people on the move from North Macedonia and pushbacks from Hungary, Croatia and Romania, as well as circular migration from Bosnia and Hercegovina, conducted autonomously by people on the move⁹¹. In the same period, Hungary illegally forced back approximately one hundred people into Serbia, even though they had never been there before⁹².

From mid March, when the epidemic was officially proclaimed in Croatia, until the end of April, the Croatian police registered 1,002 so-called irregular crossings and 630 readmissions from Slovenia, in other words, more than 1,600 intercepted and interrupted border crossings of people on the move during lockdown and the period of alleged total immobility. In the same period, only thirty-one new asylum applications were submitted, in line with the EU recommendation to “ensure continuity of procedures” in all member states⁹³. This discrepancy puts forward the question of what happened to the thousand or more persons who were intercepted, but who did not file asylum claims. Were they, like thousands of others before them, routinely deported upon interception, pushed back from Croatia to neighboring non-EU countries, including Serbia? Grassroots pushback reports from that period, newspapers articles and social media posts clearly indicate that pushbacks did not stop with the pandemic⁹⁴, nor did the violence which goes hand in hand with them.

⁸⁷ INFO PARK weekly report. 2020. 8–14 April 2020 #13 and 29 April–5 May 2020 #16 (private archive).

⁸⁸ <https://www.eurocontrol.int/COVID19> (date accessed: 13.11.2022).

⁸⁹ Comparative overview of the dynamics of the clandestine border crossings from monthly reports by the Croatian Ministry of the Interior suggests a reduction of 11% in misdemeanors related to the Aliens Acts and 35% related to the State Border Control Act from January to April 2020, <https://mup.gov.hr/pristup-informacijama-16/statistika-228/statistika-mup-a-i-bilteni-o-sigurnosti-cestovnog-prometa/283233> (date accessed: 10.10.2022). Slovenian Ministry of Interior’s statistics for the same period indicate a steady reduction but not the complete cessation of clandestine border crossing: https://www.policija.si/images/stories/Statistika/MejnaProblematika/IlegalneMigracije/2020/Januar-april_2020.pdf (date accessed: 10.10.2022). Data obtained from the Croatian Ministry of Interior in email correspondence in May 2020 suggests the same.

⁹⁰ M. Hameršak and M. Stojić Mitrović, *Pandemija koronavirusne bolesti in procesi omejevanja na Hrvaškem in v Srbiji [COVID-19 Pandemic and Bordering in Croatia and Serbia]*. “Glasnik Slovenskega etnološkega društva”, 2021, R. 61, no 2, pp. 39–44.

⁹¹ UNHCR Serbia Special Fortnightly Update, 06–19 April 2020. <https://reliefweb.int/report/serbia/unhcr-serbia-special-fortnightly-update-06-19-april-2020>; UNHCR Serbia Special Fortnightly Update 20 April – 3 May 2020 <https://data2.unhcr.org/fr/documents/details/75989>; UNHCR Serbia Monthly Update March 2020. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/75271> (date accessed: 10.10.2022); UNHCR Serbia Monthly Update May 2020, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/76834> (date accessed: 10.10.2022).

⁹² ECRE (European Council for Refugees and Exiles), *Information Sheet 28 May 2020: COVID-19 Measures Related to Asylum and Migration Across Europe*, 2020, 8–9, <https://www.ecre.org/information-sheet-28-may-2020-covid-19-measures-related-to-asylum-and-migration-across-europe/> (date accessed: 10.10.2022).

⁹³ European Commission, COVID-19: Guidance on the implementation of relevant EU provisions in the area of asylum and return procedures and on resettlement [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020XC0417\(07\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020XC0417(07)&from=EN) (date accessed: 10.10.2022).

⁹⁴ Border Violence Monitoring Network, Balkan region report – March 2020, <https://www.borderviolence.eu/balkan-region-report-march-2020/#more-14454> (date accessed: 14.11.2022); Border Violence Monitoring

Moreover, the same sources point to the escalation of violence, given that some of the most brutal uses of violence were reported by activists and people on the move in exactly that period⁹⁵. This corroborates the conclusion that, no matter how inconsistent, volatile, performative, or even fictive state borders can be, they still function as markers of state sovereignty which can easily physically exclude, harm or hurt people whose presence is framed as illegitimate.

In parallel to the above, in context of the pandemic, many EU member states introduced measures that, as formulated by Marie Mallet-Garcia and Nicolo Delvino, “temporarily broke with the traditional exclusionary approach towards irregular migrants, including extending their entitlements to services, opening avenues for regularization, and releasing irregular migrants from detention”⁹⁶. Ironically, based at least partly on the exclusionary premises of the idea of the contagious migrant, who poses a threat to public health⁹⁷, asylum seekers in Croatia were listed among groups for priority testing, together with prisoners, homeless people, and others “with risk of fast spreading of the infection and formation of clusters”⁹⁸. Other interventions, such as the prolonging of time frames for appealing⁹⁹ or leaving the country in the case of deportable so-called third-nationals, suggest challenging

Network, Special report: COVID-19 and border violence along the Balkan Route <https://www.borderviolence.eu/special-report-covid-19-and-border-violence-along-the-balkan-route/#more-14584> (date accessed: 14.11.2022); Border Violence Monitoring Network, Balkan region report – April/May 2020 <https://www.borderviolence.eu/balkan-region-report-april-may-2020/#more-14771> (date accessed: 14.11.2022); Border violence, video on Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/100000346315649/posts/3030065600348287/> (date accessed: 14.11.2022); U jeku pandemije: Hrvatska policija u BiH ilegalno prebacila 15 migranata, https://zurnal.info/novost/22893/hrvatska-policija-u-bih-ilegalno-prebacila-15-migranata?fbclid=IwAR0qEbCUCthi-suHrWthDXJcDmP5Oes-Eg81yTIgKaXpXz_zC0TNK9SJKqeg (date accessed: 14.11.2022); (VIDEO) Život na divlje – u divljim kampovima Velike Kladuše, <http://reprezent.ba/video-zivot-na-divlje-u-divljim-kampovima-velike-kladuse/?fbclid=IwAR3-i3qV51DDiJRysofOkenuDrgVf03Wkmh95YX7vYZCYNdmieBlnXMdhIE> (date accessed: 14.11.2022); Pomoc izbjeglicama u BiH/Help for refugees in Bosnia and Herzegovina, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/144469886266984/permalink/541205203260115/> (date accessed: 10.10.2022).

⁹⁵ Welcome Initiative, Godinu je uz epidemiju i potrese obilježila i eskalacija nasilja te nezakonitih protjerivanja na hrvatskim granicama, <https://welcome.cms.hr/index.php/2020/12/31/godinu-je-uz-epidemiju-i-potrese-obiljezila-i-eskalacija-nasilja-te-nezakonitih-protjerivanja-na-hrvatskim-granicama/> (date accessed: 10.10.2022).

⁹⁶ Mallet-Garcia M. and Delvino N. *Migrants with Irregular Status During the COVID-19 Pandemic*, in: *Lessons for Local Authorities in Europe Working Paper*, 2020, p. 9, <https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/CMISE-Impact-of-COVID-on-access-to-services-for-irregular-migrants.pdf> (date accessed: 10.10.2022).

⁹⁷ Meh E., *The Health of Migrants Passing through Serbia: The Threat of the Sick “Other”?*, “Glasnik Etnografskog instituta”, 2017, R. 65, no 3, pp. 573–591, (online): <http://www.doiserbia.nb.rs/img/doi/0350-0861/2017/0350-08611703573M.pdf>.

⁹⁸ Hrvatski zavod za javno zdravstvo, Protokol testiranja na COVID-19/SARS-CoV-2, <https://www.hzjz.hr/priopcenja-mediji/protokol-testiranja-nacovid-19-sars-cov-2/> (date accessed: 14.11.2022). Some other measures were envisioned, such as unaccompanied children on the move being examined by an epidemiologist at the initial health examination, but were not realized. Cf. EMN (European Migration Network). *Special Annex to the 30th EMN Bulletin EU Member States & Norway: Responses to COVID-19 in the Migration and Asylum Area*, 2020a, p. 8, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/00_eu_30_emn_bulletin_annex_COVID_19.pdf and EMN (European Migration Network). *Special Annex to the 31st EMN Bulletin EU Member States & Norway: Responses to COVID-19 in the Migration and Asylum Area*. 2020b, p. 8 https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/docs/pages/00_eu_31st_emn_bulletin_special_annex_en_0.pdf (date accessed: 10.10.2022).

⁹⁹ Hrvatski sabor, Odluka o proglašenju zakona o dopuni zakona o strancima, https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2020_04_53_1059.html (date accessed: 10.11.2022).

the restrictive and exclusive nature of borders justified by humanitarian and public order maintenance structures. Furthermore, soon after the pandemic was proclaimed, the Croatian Ministry of the Interior published a notification according to which no measures envisaged by the Aliens Act would be taken against aliens “on short-term stay (a stay of maximum 90 days during a period of 180 days)” who “cannot leave the Republic of Croatia within the time limit prescribed by the Schengen Borders Code”¹⁰⁰.

In fact, several interventions introduced in concordance with similar trends in other EU member states in the field of Dublin deportations and detentions (two pillars of the European border control regime) could be seen as putting the so-called irregular migrants closer to the general population in Croatia. As some reports¹⁰¹ and official statistics suggest, Dublin deportations to and from Croatia were halted very soon after the problematic sanitary justified detention of a newly arrived Dublin returnee to Croatia in mid-March¹⁰². Although Croatia did not officially close detention centers, as was the case in several other EU member states¹⁰³, their facilities were empty or almost empty in this period. In the circumstances where deportations stopped with the suspension of air and land transport, detention was no longer justified as a measure for securing deportation.

Here we see how processes of bordering, strengthening the territorial nation-state borders in the “national order of things”, and introducing stricter control of cross-border movement resulted in the mitigation of certain social boundaries within the territory. Despite the fact that only a small proportion of detainees in Croatia and elsewhere¹⁰⁴ are deported, releasing detainees seemed related to the pandemic, the fear of infection, and in parallel, the awareness of the harmlessness of detainees, i.e. the awareness of their criminalization in regular circumstances and their confinement. However, this is not necessarily to be interpreted as some positive move toward de-marginalization and the inclusion of the deprived. By contrast, as a comparison with the situation at borders shows, it was first and foremost a technocratic solution. Furthermore, it allowed the subsequent proliferation and identification of agents of existential threats and the re-arrangement of social categories on this line. An example of this is the fact that the initial reactions to the pandemic in the Croatian context in respect to unwanted migration generated an increased distinction between so-called irregular migrants – those who were subjected to direct violence and *a priori* prevented from accessing the state’s legal and administrative system in the name of border protection, and those few who were allowed to access it as asylum seekers. In other words, the divergence expanded between the many who were pushed back outside the EU and then sent to overcrowded camps with poor sanitary infrastructure in buffer zones, and the few who were admitted into the area where state authorities were doing all they could to create a universal environment of sanitary exemption. Here is exactly where one can trace back

¹⁰⁰ Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Croatia, Notice to Third-Country Nationals, <https://mup.gov.hr/news/notice-to-third-country-nationals/286129> (date accessed: 10.11.2022).

¹⁰¹ EMN (European Migration Network). *Special Annex to the 30th EMN Bulletin EU Member States & Norway: Responses to COVID-19 in the Migration and Asylum Area*, 2020a, p. 4, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/00_eu_30_emn_bulletin_annex_COVID_19.pdf (date accessed: 10.10.2022).

¹⁰² Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Croatia, Statistika: Tražitelji međunarodne zaštite, <https://mup.gov.hr/pristup-informacijama-16/statistika-228/statistika-trazitelji-medjunarodne-zastite/283234> (date accessed: 10.11.2022).

¹⁰³ ECRE, *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁴ M. Bosworth, *Inside Immigration Detention*, Oxford, 2014.

the main difference between Serbia and Croatia's treatment of people on the move in the initial period of the COVID-19 pandemic to their structural position and operational role within the EU border regime. Extralegal activities of the state actors in Serbia toward people on the move were intensified and spectacularized, while in Croatia, they remained largely invisibilized. Moreover, in Croatia, they remained topographically confined to state border areas, which are simultaneously EU external border areas, and enforced on those who had not yet managed to access the state's administrative system. Visible or invisible, radical militarization and extralegal violence in the external borderlands indicate a further shifting of the barycenter of the EU border regime.

Conclusion: Spectacularizing Borders and Sovereignties

On the periphery of the EU, located on opposite sides of its external borders, Croatia and Serbia employed various techniques to compartmentalize society, control movement and employ encampment, exposing the unsettled relations between the EU border regime and the sovereign nation-states which comprise it. Contrary to the impression of novelty and exceptionality, states already had techniques and instruments for the rapid enactment of borders in pandemics at their disposal. These were probed against unwanted migration for decades across vast EU borderscapes, both internal and external. In many instances, the closure of state borders at the gates of the EU was neither a simple expression of sovereign power of peripheral states nor an enactment of EU policies. Instead, states utilized transnational and supranational relationships and aspirations to frame bordering, highlighting the performative dimension of state reactions and border closures.

The positions of Croatia and Serbia within the complex of the EU border regime led to notable differences, especially with regard to the repression exhibited toward people on the move, who were already extensively framed as a threat to social, economic, cultural and corporeal order. In the context of the pandemic, this got exaggerated to levels unprecedented in recent times. In Croatia, they were forcibly expelled *en masse* to neighboring non-EU countries, including Serbia, where the EU supported the building and maintaining of camp infrastructures that would keep people on the move from going to the EU. In Serbia, which is a part of the outer EU "dumping ground," people on the move were incarcerated in camps with far from adequate sanitary conditions, especially with regard to the context of the pandemic.

Building on existing asymmetries, the borders activated in the pandemic context were often an adjustment in the articulation and emphasis in their portrayal of existing borders and bordering practices. They re-defined social groups through blending and nuancing. What may at first sight seem to be shared experiences and the merging of different groups was very soon revealed as another tool of further differentiation and compartmentalization. Latent radical, utopian and dystopian imaginaries alike burst out in this rebordering. Serbia temporarily encamped its own citizens who had become unwanted residents in the EU, targeting them as dangerous "internal other" and through carceral practices equated them with the "external other" – people on the move. They were both unwanted by the EU and Serbia had to accept them back. While the encampment of Serbian residents was soon abolished, that of unwanted foreigners continued. Moreover, in Serbia, their existence was

tolerated only in the shrunken spaces of state-run camps. In Croatia, people on the move who managed to officially access the state administrative system and not be pushed back experienced the temporary relaxation of bureaucratic apparatus. In turn, practices preventing unwanted people on the move from coming to Croatia continued and became even more violent. In general, the repulsion and isolation of the unwanted foreigners in both states became even more strict in the first critical months of the pandemic.

These new practices drew new topologies of movement repression, dividing the rest of the territory from liminal zones reserved for the unwanted people on the move. In Serbia, they became punctiform, scattered across its territory, following the camp system, while the state as a whole ceased to support a tolerating and welcoming image and became openly hostile to people on the move instead. In Croatia, the ordered, law-governed public policies on display were juxtaposed with state borders, where invisibilized extralegal practices became normalized. The differing position of people on the move regarding movement repression and bordering is suggested by the fact that borders dividing other social groups were short-lived in both Croatia and Serbia. They were more a performance of state power and spectacles of sovereignty, control and order than a viable reorganization of society. The primacy of the EU, as an axis toward which the main movement control is directed, was impeded in these initial times of the pandemic, when states reclaimed their sovereignty over their borders and territories, limiting the direct influence the EU had over movement control on a nation-state level to camps in Serbia and eastern state borders in Croatia. These spectacles of sovereignty, manifested through hyper bordering, militarization of borders, normalization of rule by a decree, and extralegal practices executed in increasingly hostile and expanding borderlands, are ultimately the refurbished features of the EU border regime as seen from its peripheries and energized within the COVID-19 crisis framework.

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