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ADDRESSING INTERSECTIONAL VULNERABILITIES IN CONTEMPORARY REFUGEE MOVEMENTS IN EUROPE

ABSTRACT

The article explores the heterogeneity and complexity of contemporary refugee movements in Europe by analysing in particular the situation along the Balkan corridor, investigating the complex intersections of gender, age, ethnic affiliation, and other aspects reflecting the situation of individuals on the move. It focuses on construction of the vulnerability of individuals and social groups. Unlike restrictive policies, which reduce mobility, we perceive migrations as autonomous processes. Through an analysis of secondary data, reports and research, the article challenges the policies of selecting migrants based on their legal status, using restrictive borders and transferring the external borders of the Schengen area into the internal territories of the member states – in our case, along the Balkan corridor.

KEY WORDS: *intersectional vulnerabilities, migrants and refugees, Balkan corridor, gender, unaccompanied minors*

Naslavljanje intersečnih ranljivosti v sodobnih begunskih gibanjih v Evropi

IZVLEČEK

V besedilu zlasti na primeru balkanske poti obravnavamo heterogenost in kompleksnost sodobnih begunskih gibanj v Evropi ter naslavljam pomembne intersečnosti med spolom, starostjo, etničnim izvorom in drugimi statusi, ki uokvirjajo položaj ljudi na poti. Poudarek je na vprašanju konstrukcije ranljivosti posameznikov in družbenih skupin. Pri tem izhajamo iz perspektive migracij kot avtonomnih procesov nasproti restriktivnim politikam omejevanja mobilnosti. Besedilo z analizo sekundarnih

podatkov in raziskav problematizira politike selekcioniranja migrantov na temelju pravnih statusov, restriktivne meje in prenos modela zunanjih schengenskih meja na notranja ozemlja, v našem primeru na Balkanski koridor.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: intersečne ranljivosti, migranti in begunci, Balkanski koridor, spol, otroci brez spremstva

1 Introduction: the complexity of contemporary refugee movements within the EU

In 2015, when refugees moved through a »barb-wired corridor« towards destination Europe on the so-called »Balkan route«, the issue of forced and mass migrations once again came to the forefront of public and political discussions, both in Slovenia as well as at the European level. The countries of the EU responded to these movements from the global South and East with policies classifying and categorising the migrants and/or refugees into more/less legitimate/wanted persons.

These classification policies should be understood as a mechanism aimed at restricting the rights of migrants to employment, social security, and political activity (Kofman et al. 2000), and they are in no way a historical novelty. On the contrary, looking at the historical development of the national population concept helps us to understand the notion that in a community supposedly sharing loyalty to the nation state, as well as the rights guaranteed by that state, migrants are generally perceived as foreigners (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003). Population movements, as Teitelbaum (2005: 200) reminds us, were controlled to a much lesser extent before the creation of sovereign nation states in the first half of the nineteenth century, when Europe and the United States started to become engaged more systematically in migration issues (Kreager 1997). At that time, a much greater need to gather statistical information about the national population as a whole also appeared. The 19th century 'ideal' of counting, classifying and categorising the members (and more importantly: the non-members) of national populations, perceived as clearly delimited and separated by the borders of nation states (Kertzer and Arel 2002; Kreager 1997), continues to persist in political as well as other public discourses and policies. Refugee policies are no exception in this regard. However, as Knežević Hočvar (2011: 8) argues, such historical and traditional understanding of the nation is no longer in line with the contemporary demographic reality in most nation states.

Nevertheless, the generalised responses to the »refugee crisis« at the level of both policy interventions and public discussions are still in line with this »traditio-

nal« understanding of the national population, classifying migrants into legitimate migrants (refugees) fleeing war, and illegitimate migrants trying to escape global economic inequalities. The governments at the national and supra-national European Union levels are increasingly striving to restrict migrations of the latter group and of »third-country nationals« in general, which has led to increasing insecurities for migrants within Europe (Freedman 2003: 3). Consequently, individuals arriving in »fortress Europe«, who used the latest achievements of modern technologies and had substantial economic means, were generally not perceived as refugees, as they did not fit the gendered prototype of refugees as passive, helpless, and economically deprived individuals, a prototype generally conflated into a single category - women and children (Zavratnik and Cukut Krilić 2016).

The article therefore explores the question how vulnerabilities are constructed through representations of suffering, and who is excluded from such classifications of vulnerable groups (Palmary et al. 2010). Narrow interpretations of vulnerability can have the effect of minimising women's access to assistance by insisting on a pre-existing and feminised notion of vulnerability (ibid.), and by constructing females and/or children as passive individuals and/or primarily victims, instead of being agents of social change as well. Furthermore, men as well, especially when not conforming to the heteronormative standards of masculinity, may also be viewed as vulnerable individuals, facing multiple insecurities while being on the move.

In this respect, the policies of selecting and categorising migrants are the principal focus of our discussion. In line with Crosby's observation (2006: 3), stating that »because of the way we label, define, and categorise people who move, we obscure and make invisible their actual lived experience«, we argue that such policies mainly address the legal status of individuals on the move (especially their country of origin and citizenship), and that they reduce the complexity of human migrations to the dichotomy legal/illegal. We maintain that the varieties of contexts in which individuals migrate, including overlapping categories, are generally not considered in most policy and other public discussions about migration. Consequently, we argue that the heterogeneity of migration situations within the corridor and numerous intersectionalities between gender, social class, age, religion, and other axes of social stratification are largely overlooked in these endeavours.

Acknowledging that the corridor along the Balkan route enabled a more »efficient« transit of individuals on the move towards Western Europe, the vulnerability of migrants in specific micro contexts along the corridor is addressed within two

main frameworks. Firstly, we question the »hard« and impassable European borders and their remilitarisation along the corridor. In the second part, we analyse intersectional vulnerabilities of particular refugees. In this context we devote special attention to unaccompanied minors and victims of human trafficking, and examine the gendered implications of contemporary refugee movements. Our research is not based on primary empirical material, but we focus instead on research contributions to the field and examine secondary empirical data.¹ Taking into account not only the lack of academic research on the issue, but above all the lack of reliable field data, the article's principal aim is to provide conceptual contributions to these complex migratory situations, which policies primarily define as »the refugee« and/or »migration crisis«. In doing so, we focus on two issues. Firstly, we re-examine the process of criminalisation of migration manifested by closed borders, and the violent, systemic divisions migrants/refugees face when crossing various nation states. Secondly, we address the position of the refugees – the individuals on a migratory route – caught up in policies of border closure as well as classification into legitimate/illegitimate refugees, based on his/her gender, country of origin, citizenship, and other social statuses. On that basis, we argue for a more liberal migration/refugee regime, which at the micro-level would not criminalise individual refugees and, at the macro-level, would not act against basic democratic standards and solidarity in addressing migration and asylum policies in Europe.

2 Violent borders and people on the move

In the last few decades, mass migrations from the global South, to which European states have responded primarily by closing their borders, as well as populist policies of segregation, classification, and selection of »genuine« and »false« refugees, have revived the issues of political community, exclusion of the Other, impermeable social and national borders, and (cultural) differences. In spite of its strong migratory tradition and almost historical presence of both immigration and emigration to and from its territories (Castles and Miller 2009; Goldin et al.

1. Although some interviews with asylum seekers housed in Ljubljana have been carried out by one of the authors, we do not focus on individual biographies of individuals in this text. Instead, our focus is on contextualising the question of vulnerability through systemic instruments - state policies both of the EU as well as third countries and negotiated policies at the intersection of both (for instance, Germany-Turkey and the Merkel-Erdogan agreement from 2016; readmission agreements between Italy and Northern African states, etc.).

2011), Europe has not been able to establish itself as a community capable of putting integration, inclusion, and solidarity - instead of borders and exclusion - at the core of its migration and asylum policies. The so-called migration/refugee crisis is not a crisis of migration, but is mainly a crisis of inadequate global and European migration policies, resulting in extreme cases of migration controls through structural criminalisation of migration. Border policies have been at the core of global migration policies for decades and have contributed significantly to structural violence against people on the move. »The European migration crisis demonstrates the structural violence of the global border regime, as the hardening of borders and the closing down of migration routes makes movement extremely dangerous for the majority of the people in the world« (Jones 2016: 27). The modern nation states of the »liberal« West have fenced themselves in, using walls that may be physical, electronic, or bureaucratic, and Europe as a union erected electronic »e-borders« (Zavratnik 2001) nearly two decades ago. The trend of establishing hard, impermeable borders at the external edge of the European community was in line with the development of sophisticated information technologies, turning border management and consequently control over mobility into largely a matter of surveillance cameras, biometrics, and databases, regulating entry and determining who is »legal« and who »illegal« (Andreas and Snyder 2000; Pajnik and Zavratnik Zimic 2003). This focus on control over movement in physical space and control of bodies, based both on bureaucratic mechanisms and the assistance of information technologies, occurred before »migrants in groups« started arriving at the borders of the EU (see the example of the USA-Mexican border, for instance). As Andreas suggested, new walls around the West were created "along the geographic fault lines dividing rich and poor regions: most notably the southern border of the United States and the eastern and southern border of the European Union" (2000: 1). In order to control transit as well as to prevent further mass migration, governments thus fell back on classical, physical endeavours, well-known from the historical arsenal of »defence policies«, based on building walls and implementing walling-off policies. To illustrate in rather simple terms, no concrete Berlin or Chinese wall has been erected, but it is clear that borders had a prominent role in history, and they are by no means disappearing from the modern political agenda. On the contrary, barbed wires and other sophisticated materials used for the electronic supervision of people's mobility have been erected even more quickly, and they have the same political effect in modern societies.

What these policies of closing borders and criminalising migrants failed to take into account was that structural criminalisation of migration creates a parallel »mar-

ket in migrant lives”, where human traffickers dictate the rules. It is not an exaggeration to state that restrictive migration policies are among the factors most responsible for the rise in organised crime that has taken over the organisation of most migration routes in the Mediterranean, on the Balkan route, as well as in other areas where paths for safe migration have been closed. In this respect, dying on the road to the promised destination Europe is perceived as »collateral damage« by the EU (Ferrer-Gallardo and van Houtum 2014). It seems that European neoliberal policies have accepted this kind of »outsourcing«, although they have launched the fight against organised criminal enterprises as one of the main features of contemporary »migration management«. Needless to say, various discourses about inadequate refugee reception structures, crisis, state of emergency, and smuggling networks, do not pinpoint the source of the problem in restrictive EU migration policies, nor in national border policies, although these are crucial to understanding the current microstructure and vulnerabilities of migrants. It is precisely for this reason that policy makers are willing to perceive mobility – the preeminent attribute of the modern global subject – as a luxury that the Other does not deserve (Kirtsoglou in Tsimouris 2015: 8). As De Genova (2016) aptly states:

people on the move across state borders are not in fact considered to be the genuine bearers of any presumptive (purportedly) universal human right' to asylum, but rather are always under suspicion of deception and subterfuge produced as the inherently dubious claimants to various forms of institutionalised protection.

The historical presence of migration in all societies clearly reveals complex migration practices; and these practices are evident in modern patterns of globalised mobility through intertwined narratives. From the perspective of implementing restrictive border policies, the trend of border securitisation can certainly be added to the trends in international migration at the turn of the millennium. European policies can thus be seen mainly as closing off the global North to migrations. The paradigm of safety and, consequently, surveillance and restrictions, as the main elements of migration and asylum policies, have resulted in a »we-community« wiring itself in, first with e-borders, and later with barbed wire (Zavratnik and Cukut Krilić 2016: 258).

However, the domination of border policies in these discussions has led not only to structural discrimination of people on the move, migration management has also become entrapped in the neoliberal discourse of »human resources«. These are perceived in a similar way to goods, but although the mobility of capital, goods and information is not under question in these discussions, the free movement of people across national borders is hotly debated. Analyses of

border policies, both around fortress Europe, as well as at the southern border of the USA (see more: Andreas and Snyder 2000; Giddens 2000) have convincingly demonstrated that both the Schengen as well as the Mexican-American border are technologically perfected contemporary systems, aimed at controlling individuals, limiting their entry, and capturing those trying to overcome the physical restrictions. Thus, when restrictive control at the EU's external borders became the principal »defensive mechanism« against newcomers, it was clear that border policies had become the core element of European migration policies. Nevertheless, the experiences on the Balkan route clearly demonstrate that the EU's assertion of restrictive external borders quickly became a model for militarised internal borders, and that is exactly what happened along the temporarily open Balkan corridor. And it is because of these developments that the corridor, as a new element in »migration management«, merits further attention.

3 Transit migration. The case of the “safe corridor” on the Balkan route

The refugee crisis and the so-called Balkan route in 2015 are largely associated with the closure of the maritime passage used by refugees to travel, primarily to Italy. By means of increased surveillance at sea and other restrictive migration control measures, Europe's policies led to the closure of one land migration route and the emergence of an alternative one. The former took migrants from Turkey through Greece, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Albania or Montenegro to Serbia, and then to the EU. On the Balkan route they were caught in a buffer zone (Lunaček and Meh 2016) at the gates of the EU. After the humanitarian corridor was opened, their journey continued through Croatia, Hungary, and Slovenia towards their »desired« destinations, especially Austria, Germany, and the Scandinavian countries. Interventions by the authorities along the Balkan route to organise the passage of the migrants and their responsibilities for migrant welfare were minimal; they perceived migrants predominantly as »human cargo« on the road to their desired destination in Western Europe.

The corridor on the Balkan route emerged as a new element in migration management and was supposed to function in a humanitarian way, in support of the migrants. The emergence of the corridor coincided with the closure of the Hungarian border, which redirected the »flow« of people towards and through Croatia. Its closure began in November 2015, when it remained open only to citizens of Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, and its final closure occurred in March 2016, resulting in new illegalisation of people on the move (see more in Lunaček and Meh 2016).

Although the corridor did perform its primary humanitarian function by responding to the elementary needs of the migrants (providing food and clothing, emergency health care, assistance to the most vulnerable, transportation to the next border, etc.), it nevertheless deepened the already established policies of securitisation and control. In reality, the border policies at Europe's periphery, based on high-tech elements, were now used at the internal borders along the corridor, and individuals were subjected to similar means of control and classification (systems of registration before entering a nation state are a clear example). In a legal sense, the corridor may also be viewed as a »clear, deliberate and coordinated deviation from the asylum and migration rules established at the level of EU member states and countries of the Schengen area« (Kogovšek Šalamon 2016: 64). It represented a state of exception and the rules of the European legislators were suspended and replaced by different measures and decrees (ibid.).

This response of both the national and EU legislators can be interpreted from various perspectives: a humanitarian and solidarity perspective (diverse responses to the unbearable conditions on the migration route), a regulatory perspective (the suspense of Schengen rules, newly established control at internal borders and, in its radical form, barbed-wire fences and border closures), but also through the lens of the autonomy of migration movements in response to restrictive migration and/or border policies. These should not be perceived merely as individual responses, but as a long-term process of »revolting« against structural criminalisation and securitisation of borders. Seen through this lens, migrants can be viewed as autonomous actors, moving despite bureaucratic obstacles, policies of regulated entry, borders at the external edges of nation states and/or internal borders. As discussed in migration studies by various researchers (Lipovec Čebren and Zorn 2016; Mezzarda 2011; Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013), the concept of the autonomy of migration focuses on the motivations of individuals migrating in spite of restrictive policies, bureaucratic responses, deportations, and the externalisation of borders. In this perspective, migrants can be analysed as the proponents of a new social movement, mapping »new global mobilities« from the global South and East and »diverse manifestations of the autonomous subjectivity of human mobility itself« (De Genova 2016), leading to the emergence of new explanatory models of migrant movements. Despite criticism from civil society, academic and activist circles, the restrictive European borders remained firmly closed, and migrants were among the actors who most radically reinterpreted the meaning of such borders in an ongoing process. In this perspective, migrants can also be analysed as the proponents of a new social movement, actors of social resistance, and protagonists of political change, not

only as passive recipients of humanitarian aid, which served the interest in their further passivization and depoliticization.

The corridor that reinstated the internal borders performed the function of legalising the passage of a high number of people quite satisfactorily, since according to the European Commission around 650,000 migrants moved through the corridor on the Balkan route (Kogovšek Šalamon 2016: 63). But most importantly, it temporarily performed a humanitarian role masking the restrictive policies of migration control. The corridor functioned as a clear demonstration of the power of nation states to suspend not only passage, but also mutually recognised and adopted rules of migration management. The crisis management approach of these policies primarily adopted the perception of migrants as a burden (measured in the number of distributed food and blankets) and their »smooth« passage to the next nation state on the Balkan route. This approach resulted in increased control over migrants, relegated to the limbo of an undefined state of regulated temporariness. Moreover, the needs of the most vulnerable individuals on the move, such as children, especially those travelling unaccompanied, trafficked individuals, pregnant women, etc. could not be adequately addressed by this pragmatic technical »solution« to crisis management adopted both by the EU and in the Balkan region. Although the approach legalised migration at least temporarily, it also led to militarised borders and dehumanised individuals on the move by putting them into a state of »temporary transit«.

At the end of these deliberations about the safe corridor, one more crucial aspect needs to be addressed, namely the provision of selective security for certain individuals by overlooking the situation of other individuals on the move. As Jones (2016: 27) has put it:

The focus on a limited set of Syrian refugees was politically prudent. It demonstrated that EU leaders were taking the situation seriously and were acting to help refugees in need while simultaneously denying any obligation to migrants from any other place.

Migration policies, classificatory in their essence, provided a simplified answer to the question: who is a »real refugee«? The focus (mainly) on refugees from Syria coincided with policies separating real (legitimate) from economic (illegitimate) refugees, a dichotomy that was also reflected in the public opinion - through the image of a real refugee, worthy of protection.² Women and children, perceived

2. Economic migrants are generally perceived in political, public as well as academic, discourses as economic opportunists, who have left their homes voluntarily in search of a better life, overlooking the fact that their economic situation is fundamentally politically produced (Holmes and Castañeda 2016: 17).

as among the »most vulnerable« actors in contemporary refugee movements, were certainly among the social groups »worthy« of such protection.

After sketching the broader policy framework enabling us to analyze the microstructure of the everyday life of migrants, we now focus our attention on their vulnerabilities, which are analysed from the perspective of intersectional vulnerabilities. In this respect, we address the gendered risks for individuals on the move, their vulnerability to human trafficking and focus on children as autonomous actors in the migration process.

4 How gender matters when talking about refugees

As argued in previous sections of the text, one of the main problematic aspects of contemporary migration debates is the issue of classification and categorisation. As stated by Helms (2015), the responses to the so-called refugee crisis generally took for granted that migrants could be divided into legitimate migrants fleeing war, and illegitimate migrants fleeing global economic disparities. She continues that a problematic assumption exists in the supposed entitlement to refugee status and the role of the passive victim. On the other hand, the ability to make decisions and living a life beyond mere survival are seen as factors diminishing one's entitlement to refugee status. In this perspective, the notion of the refugee is feminized, and any deviation from passivity and vulnerability is perceived as questioning the status of the victim (*ibid.*). Such a perception of female refugees is quite reminiscent of »classic« approaches to female refugees, which tended to view them as passive, vulnerable victims of the »Third World«, whose barbaric cultures and backwardness they supposedly fled (Oswin 2001). Consequently, it seemed imperative to »protect« them instead of studying their diverse experiences, not only of oppression, but also of agency (*ibid.*).

Although women and girls currently make up just under a third of asylum applicants in the EU, the proportion of female asylum applicants has continued to increase since the launch of the EU-Turkey Statement in March 2016 (Mixed Migration Platform 2016). Although their vulnerability at different points of their journey is influenced by multiple factors, not only gender, gender-specific threats, related more specifically to health complications, especially for pregnant women, sexual exploitation, and gender-based violence have been extensively documented (Freedman 2016a; 2016b; Mixed Migration Platform 2016). Female migrants may face particular insecurities in their strategies for resistance and survival, as current immigration and asylum policies are pushing them into situations in which they are at greater risk (Freedman 2016a). Female refugees are at a heightened

risk for sexual and other forms of gender-based violence not only in conflict settings, but also in the course of their migration, at the borders of nation states, and upon arrival in the countries of destination (Heidari and García Moreno 2016). The level of danger they face has increased due to tightened legislation and limited legal alternatives, leaving all those on the move more likely to resort to smuggling and to face greater risks related to trafficking and exploitation (Mixed Migration Platform 2016). The IOM has identified refugees and migrants among the groups most vulnerable to trafficking, with women and girls within these groups most at risk and most likely to be taken for sexual exploitation.

However, although insecurities experienced by refugees during their journey are highlighted in public discourses, less attention has been paid, according to Freedman (2016a), to other forms of violence and insecurities experienced by refugees, especially gender-based violence, including sexual violence. Amnesty International (in Asaf 2017, see also Mixed Migration Platform 2016) interviewed women and girls who travelled from Turkey to Greece. They were at a great risk of becoming victims of violence, robbery, and extortion, with threats of rape and sexual assault by both smugglers, as well as officials such as security guards, policemen and, last but not least, other refugees. They have also described being coerced into sex in exchange for paying less for the crossing. Men have also been victims of sexual violence, used as a tactic of war, as cases of men being sexually assaulted by regime members in Syria have also been reported (Meger in Asaf 2017), putting sexual violence against men further on the agenda of the international community. The challenges facing sexual minorities, for instance, are also particular and multiplied due to the overlapping of both gender and sexual identities (CTDC 2017). Furthermore, in recent events related to the »refugee crisis«, exposure to risk faced by men and boys, who are more likely to be caught up in active conflict or conscripted into military service, have been noted as a key factor in the decision-making process of families about leaving their countries of origin. While travelling in family groups provided a certain degree of security for female migrants from Syria and Afghanistan in terms of larger protection from sexual and other forms of gender-based violence, Freedman (2016b) also argues that it brought about other problems, such as lack of housing, worries concerning children, and the inability to make independent decisions with regard to their migratory journeys. Less frequent were cases when women left before other family members, assuming that they and their children would more easily gain asylum than men. In such cases, it was believed that women would negotiate with border guards and immigration authorities more easily due to their perceived vulnerability (Freedman 2016b; Mixed Migration Platform 2016). It is also worth mentioning

that when faced with large numbers of refugees, aid providers across Greece and Western Balkans often made significant efforts to prioritise those perceived as more vulnerable, especially women and children,³ which in specific cases led to the exclusion of men from any kind of assistance (Mixed Migration Platform 2016). As Farrag (2009: 1) argues, the »emphasis on female victimisation versus the reality of male silence and non-reporting has left one group, namely victimised boys and men, without a space for healing, treatment, and activism.«

Refugees also increasingly live for long periods of time outside any protection regimes and without any aid or support, which makes them extremely vulnerable to labour exploitation of all kinds, including human trafficking (Wilson 2011). Nevertheless, the predominant EU response to the »refugee crisis« has been criticized »by many for its focus on repression of trafficking and prevention of 'illegal' migration, rather than on protecting the rights and lives of migrants who are desperate to reach Europe« (Freedman 2016a: 19). The best way to reduce trafficking risks for refugees would be to provide them with a durable solution that could offer them more permanence, a legal status and means of economic support (Wilson 2011). As Hupp Williamson (2017: 75) notes, the

act of Othering, or viewing and treating individuals as different on some basis, can create vulnerable populations for human trafficking because they are prevented from gaining access to the same resources (jobs, education, etc.) as others. The act of othering in this context is intersectional because race, gender, class and age converge as intersecting vulnerabilities.

This brings us to another important issue: due to increasingly restrictive migration policies human trafficking is becoming primarily an »illegal« migration phenomenon in public discussions, instead of shifting the focus of public deliberations on this issue to the socioeconomic position of migrants and their inability to find work and legalise their residence in the new country. In this vein, it seems of utmost importance to link the study of human trafficking to the issues of migration and border controls (Pajnik 2008: 84–85). In line with the fact that restrictive migration policies are predominantly responsible for the rise of organized crime along the main migration/refugee routes, the fight against these criminal associations, rather than a re-examination of EU/national migration/refugee and/or border policies, has become one of the main characteristics of migration management (Zavratnik and Cukut Krilić 2016).

3. An example is the provision of gender-segregated latrines, separate sleeping areas for families and single men, and women-friendly spaces for breastfeeding, although these were often under-used for fear of being left behind (Mixed Migration Platform 2016).

Thus, as discussed by Suchland (2015) in the context of trafficking, the primary focus on locating, identifying and categorizing the victim moves the attention towards locating individual rather than structural violence. As Suchland (2015: 179) continues, because

trafficking does not exist until a victim is produced through the state's judicial process; we fail to see the problem of trafficking outside that legal arrangement. A deeper economic analysis of trafficking may reveal solutions to the problem that do not require a plaintiff.

It therefore seems crucial to link human trafficking to the broader challenges and topics of contemporary societies: precariousness, global economic disparities, gender, racial and ethnic inequalities, and especially the role of migration/border regimes, addressed in some detail in the previous sections of this text.

5 Autonomous child migration: unaccompanied migrant children

Children in migration in general, and unaccompanied minors in particular, are a phenomenon that is to date poorly researched in migration studies, although children certainly make up a significant proportion of migrants worldwide. Historically, research on migration primarily focused on the male experience, research on women has only been a topic of interest since the mid of 1960s, while with regard to children, they were a somehow a »silent« part of migration processes (Chavez and Menjivar 2010: 76). The fact remains that »studies of contemporary migration are often focused on adults, either ignoring the movement of children, or assuming that it is subsidiary to that of adult. Children do move with their parents, but they also move independently, in search of work and education« (King 2010:82). This absence may be related to cultural categories of both childhood and migration: children are mostly defined by their innocence and vulnerability, their social value taken for granted and unquestioned, while migrants, especially undocumented migrants and asylum seekers are usually attributed with agency and cunning behaviour, and their value constantly questioned (O'Connell Davidson 2011: 462-463).

Authors in general note the lack of data for a global estimate of the volume of child migration, whether with their parents or independently. Some data or, better, estimates are available from global migration agencies such as the United Nations and IOM, while on the other hand, the majority of research studies are localised or framed in the context of a single nation state. This is a significant shortcoming, as »the lives of migrant children, today more than ever, are frequen-

tly shaped by forces and events taking place simultaneously in more than one national context and within the cultural reproduction of multiple communities« (Chavez and Menjivar 2010: 77).

Before reviewing the existing information in the form of numbers, it is essential to emphasise a conceptual starting point in the research on child migration: the position of an autonomous child migrant as a social actor in migratory processes. Although there is no doubt about his/her vulnerable position, we do not intend to see unaccompanied minors as passive, powerless, and fully dependent, but rather in a broader perspective as Chavez and Menjivar noted in an overview research on unaccompanied migrant children from Mexico to the USA: »these 'new actors' may assume several roles (as parents, providers, smugglers, migrants, children, etc.) across borders, for instance when an unaccompanied migrant teenager must find full-time employment to provide for her child« (2010: 76). The processes of autonomous child migration represent one of »the most contentious policy areas« (King 2010: 83) because of their impact on a broader range of public policies in the domain of child care, social security, guardianship, but also in granting access to education and labour market.

The fact remains that children are the first to be affected by global insecurities - war, poverty, and climate change. In these contexts children are among the most vulnerable people on the planet. Their vulnerability is further exacerbated during long journeys across international borders and due to unstable policy responses in the new (receiving) societies. In the course of their journey they experience numerous transitions: across geographical spaces, through international protection procedures, across time, as well as deeply personal psychological transitions (Sedmak and Medarić 2017). Growing insecurities worldwide lead to a growing crisis for children. According to UNICEF data (UNICEF), nearly 50 million children have migrated across borders or been forcibly displaced around the world, and more than half of these girls and boys fled violence and insecurity - 28 million in total. These children may hold different statuses, or lack any required status, they may be refugees, internally displaced persons, or just migrants. However, the position adopted by UNICEF, other global agencies (such as UNHCR, IOM, ILO)⁴ and numerous NGOs working with refugee children in crisis areas, clearly states that »first and foremost, they are children: no matter

4. See more for policy responses in: SOS Children's Villages: Position paper on migrant and refugee children, 2016; International Rescue Committee: The refugee crisis in Europe and the Middle East, September, 2015; The ILO Response to the Syrian Refugee crisis, March 2017; Terre des Hommes: Child labour Report, 2016; UNHCR: The Future of Syria: refugee children in crisis, November 2013 etc.

where they come from, whoever they are, and without exception«. The number of child refugees under the UNHCR mandate has more than doubled in just 10 years, thus validating the statistical data. Nevertheless, it may be assumed that the number is even higher due to the lack of reliable statistics and the fact that many migrant children are never subjected to registration.

We will now continue with a more focused analysis of the position and contradictions concerning unaccompanied minors in the EU. According to the most recent EUROSTAT data (EUROSTAT 2017) from 2016, 63,300 asylum seekers applying for international protection in the member states of the EU were considered to be unaccompanied minors, about a third less than in 2015 (when nearly 96,500 unaccompanied minors were registered as applying for international protection), but this was nevertheless about 5 times more than the annual average during the 2008-2013 period (around 1,000 per year). In 2016, a substantial majority of the unaccompanied minors were males (89%) and over two thirds were aged 16 to 17 (68%, or about 43,300 persons), while those aged 14 to 15 accounted for 21% (around 13,500 persons), and those aged less than 14 for 10% (nearly 6,300 persons) of all unaccompanied minors. More than a third (38%) of the asylum applicants considered to be unaccompanied minors in the EU in 2016 were Afghans and about a fifth (19%) were Syrians.

According to the same Eurostat data source, the majority of asylum applicants considered to be unaccompanied minors were registered in Germany: nearly 36,000 minors, or 57% of all those registered in the EU, followed by Italy with 6,000 or 10%. Concerning the structure of the asylum applicants in the EU, it is quite significant that most of unaccompanied minors were Afghans (38% of registered unaccompanied minors in 2016) or Syrians (19%). Even if the data are incomplete and partial, the fact remains that children were at the forefront of the refugee crisis in 2015/16.

The issue of reliable data is a central one in studying unaccompanied minors because of the fact that children predominantly do not have an interest in being registered under different national registration systems. Even when registration takes place, they frequently disappear within a short period. According to a House of Lords paper, the most commonly reported reasons for children wanting to transit to another member state (or to another part of the same state) were that they had family or friends there, the existence of a diaspora, had a pre-arranged job opportunity there, and/or it was more likely for them to access the labour market due to the better economic conditions in that country (the latter being reported by Bulgaria, Slovenia, Spain) (2016: 56). In addition, according to the same study Missing Children Europe already reported in 2013 that:

50% of unaccompanied children went missing within 48 hours of being placed in certain reception centres after their arrival in the EU. The number of migrant children going missing across Europe continues to grow. At the time of our inquiry, Europol reported that at least 10,000 migrant children were missing in the EU (House of Lords 2016: 55).

One of the experts, Kirsty McNeill⁵, described the problem in the following words, aptly summarising the situation throughout the EU:

Children who had been registered by authorities across Europe simply fell out of the system. Sometimes that is because they are actively evading being pulled into system, because they have an ideal country of destination and are desperate to get to family and protection elsewhere in Europe. We have evidence of children actively absconding from reception centres, even if space has been found there for them. Children who are outside the system are, to our mind, the most vulnerable (2016: 55).

There are no exact data as to how many unaccompanied minors entered the EU via the Balkan route, although local statistics and scarce research show trends of a substantial presence of migrant children. In Slovenia, for instance, the largest share of unaccompanied minors among all young asylum applicants (57% of all asylum applicants were aged less than 18) was recorded in 2016 (Eurostat 11 May 2017). Increased numbers of unaccompanied minors among asylum applicants were also noted in Croatia (36%) and Bulgaria (42%) along the Balkan route and, predictably, in Italy (54% or 6,000 minors) (ibid.). The Europol figure of 10,000 missing children within the EU suggest that some of these children »disappeared« along their journey via the Balkan corridor, as this was one of their main entry routes.

Although instances of disappearance can be seen as a strategy to circumvent restrictive migration policies, it is certainly not an exaggeration to state that trafficking, too, is a real risk to these children. Nevertheless, as we have discussed more generally in the previous section, and although there has been great public and policy concern about the suffering of »trafficked children«, how much of their suffering resulted from immigration/state policies remains largely undocumented: they are held in detention centres unsuitable for children, subject to violence, lack adequate medical health care and access to education (O'Connell Davidson 2011). The gap between the almost universal commitment to children's rights and the actual lived experience of migrant children thus remains largely unrecognised

5. Kirsty McNeill is Save the Children's Executive Director of Policy, Advocacy and Campaigns.

(ibid.). Bhabha (2000) argues that the needs of both children, who are victims of the exploitative trafficking business, as well as the needs of those that are consensual participants in an unauthorised smuggling process, meet at the point of their arrival to a new destination, and that their voice is of utmost importance at this stage.

6 Conclusions

In many world regions, vulnerable individuals and especially women and children are at risk to be exploited, because they are among the weakest links, not only in contemporary migration movements, but also in contemporary organised businesses related to these movements. As argued above, these businesses are largely a product of the structural criminalisation of migrants, which itself is a consequence of the lack of opportunities for safe and legal entry into the EU; these developments have been extensively evidenced by the contemporary events surrounding the supposed »refugee crisis«.

Paying attention to the historical development of the national population concept as well, to utilitarian perceptions of migrants as needed to complement and rejuvenate the ageing »domestic« workforce, and to the processes of restructuring welfare systems, it is then imperative to question the dichotomies classifying migrants into more/less wanted/legitimate ones, and the prevailing language of classifications that reduces a wide array of reasons for migration to simplified »imagined« categories, defined by different dimensions of social stratification.

The discursive context which constructs refugees as a threat to »Western societies« also tends to dominate the discussions about refugee policies, which continue to associate the supposedly »unsuccessful integration« of migrants with their perceived cultural and/or religious difference; such perceptions are quite obvious also in the case of recent refugee arrivals, where Islam is constructed as a threat to »Western values and our way of life«.

The responses to the diversity of migrations within the corridor among NGO organisations, activists, and civil society have been documented elsewhere. In this article we primarily point out that the concept of autonomy of migration can be a useful concept emerging from the field, which has evolved in response to the »classical« policies of selection and categorisation. For instance, among unaccompanied migrant children, this trend is evidenced by the high level of »disappearance« from formal migration channels and routes. In this way, children, not only vulnerable individuals, but also autonomous subjects, may be able to overcome the restrictive policies of classification of individuals on the move.

It also seems that the concept of security, increasingly understood as security »for« the nation state, not security »of« the migrants, needs to be thoroughly modified. More attention should be devoted to vulnerable groups crossing international borders, women and minors among them, and to assuring adequate security for those at risk of being trafficked. As Steans (in Rose 2016: 10) argues, when we start to look at security outside the context of the nation state and in relation to the multiple insecurities that individuals face, then the argument that we need a global, not a national perspective of security, becomes increasingly valid. Extending the notion of vulnerability also to men, especially those that do not fit the heteronormative standards of masculinity (for instance homosexual men, non-combatants), is also of utmost importance for achieving a more nuanced gendered approach to contemporary refugee/migration movements. Freedman (2016b) argues that a more careful analysis of the experiences of both men and women may help, at least to some extent, to overcome the stereotypes of the »dangerous migrant male« and the »vulnerable« female, which continue to prevail in the media and political discourses; in addition we should also take into account the fact that gender relations might change during and after the migratory process. And last but not least, there is an obvious and urgent need for reliable data on displaced populations. Although statistics including women and children in the picture have corrected the previous omission of these two groups in research endeavours, they often conflate, as Freedman (2010: 594) argues, women and children into a single category, thus further obscuring the real statistical differences between women and men. In this respect, research backed by statistical data can certainly contribute to more evidence-based strategies, mechanisms and tools to build a more coherent and efficient response to assist individual refugees (Vah Jevšnik 2017). An analysis of the multiple insecurities and vulnerabilities faced by individuals on the move can make this response better informed and adapted to the needs of diverse individuals. In addition to the need for »hard« data, biographic/narrative qualitative approaches can help researchers to discern the multiple meanings of migration and to point out the increasingly diversified contexts of contemporary migration/refugee movements. But this, of course, cannot be achieved without fundamentally challenging policies that construct individuals as vulnerable in the first place. As Freedman (2016b) argues: »it does seem clear that migration does entail considerable threats to human security and that individual security is particularly threatened by the contemporary efforts to control migration.« Although less restrictive migration policies could lead to less vulnerabilities, especially for migrants/refugees during their journey, by reducing the different forms of structural violence they are subjected to, the mere »opening« of borders is but

a prerequisite towards reducing these vulnerabilities. Access to a wide array of social, political, and economic rights in the receiving countries, and asserting a more pro-migration social and political climate at local, regional, national and supra-national levels is also of fundamental importance. In the light of the recent restructuring of the "welfare state" in almost all European countries, leading to increased vulnerabilities and precariousness of the »domestic population« as well, and the ever-persisting anachronistic notions about the national population in the media, political and general »public« discourses, there is still quite a long way ahead towards achieving this goal.

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