

Precarious Emplacement in Croatia: Conceptualising More-Than-Transient Migration on the Balkan Route

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SUMMARY

The article argues that the dynamic of migration on the Balkan route is changing into something more than transit. Croatia is presented as a case in point of a site where former migration aspirations are redefined as migrants encounter various types of bordering mechanisms that decelerate migration and begin developing relations with other residents. We argue that the dynamic of mobility and immobility and the ways it entangles localities en route are crucial for understanding the changing migration patterns in the Balkans. We overview concepts such as “stuckness”, “waiting”, “permanent temporariness”, “limbo”, and “liminality”, which describe the ways in which migrants navigate between temporary and permanent states of movement and residence. Additionally, the article develops the concept of “precarious emplacement” in order to move beyond transit and to capture the ambiguities between moving and staying, temporariness and permanence, and inclusion and exclusion. The concept highlights that the practices related to settling, along with the social interactions with other residents associated with them, occur in conditions of uncertainty and social marginalisation. Precarious emplacement encompasses the ways precarity permeates migrants’ experiences and the fabric of post-war and post-socialist urban spaces and relations they move through and come to inhabit. The article concludes by arguing that, given the heterogeneity of migrants’ life trajectories, the concept of a “transit migrant” may obscure the vulnerabilities migrants experience during periods of immobility, and it advocates for a more nuanced conceptual approach.

KEY WORDS: Balkan route, Croatia, migrants, transit migration, (im)mobilities, precarious emplacement

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, the term “Balkan route” has become synonymous with the transit migration of persons, mainly from the Middle East and Africa, entering Europe through the former Yugoslav states. Indeed, since the

beginning of the 2000s, migrants from Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and other countries journeying towards the European Union started to appear in the Balkans. This culminated in the period often designated as the “long summer of migration” 2015–2016 (Kasperek and Speer, 2015), that is between September 2015 and March 2016 when more than 650,000 people passed through Croatia as part of the so-called Balkan corridor.¹

Migration continues even after the closing of the corridor and despite Croatia’s recent accession to the Schengen area. Additionally, many migrants are staying in the country for longer periods, either waiting for another opportunity to move or deciding to settle. This article thus raises the following question: how can we conceptualise these new patterns of (im)mobility that no longer strictly fit the concept of “transit migration”?

Transit migration is commonly understood in both public and academic discourse as movements of people from a supposed country of origin through various countries en route until they arrive in a supposedly final destination country (Collyer et al., 2012). Sensationalist images of mass movements of migrants and refugees travelling on foot and boarding trains across the Balkans are familiar depictions of transit migration. However, if we are to understand migrants’ trajectories as entangled in the localities they move through, and acknowledge that migrants’ own plans and aspirations regarding their journeys are not rigidly predefined before their departures, we are presented with a different picture. With the passage of time and with regard to encounters with various bordering mechanisms, as well as local residents en route, migrants may become more permanent residents. Therefore, their aspirations and trajectories appear to be more open-ended and malleable. The types of migrants’ mobility and immobility through the territories of former Yugoslav states are proliferating and evolving, therefore suggesting that transit migration along the Balkan route is undergoing a qualitative transformation that requires an updated conceptual framework.

It is a fact that migration through Croatia continues and that the majority of persons on the route are transit migrants. However, from 2006 to 2022, 1034 people were granted international protection in Croatia, and the number of asylum requests has been on the rise (Ministarstvo unutarnjih poslova Republike Hrvatske, 2022). This suggests that an increasing number of persons on the move are willing to change their initial plans of passing through Croatia in order to reach the western and northern parts

¹ See Hameršak et al. (2020), Kurnik and Razsa (2020), and Hess and Kasperek (2021) for other critical accounts of the Balkan route.

of the EU, choosing instead to settle in the country. It should also be noted that many migrants who once passed through the country were deported back to Croatia according to the “country of first entry principle” of the Dublin agreement. During the fieldwork I conducted in Zagreb, it became apparent that many deported migrants lose hope of being able to migrate again and obtain asylum elsewhere, making them more inclined to stay in Croatia.² Many of these migrants repeatedly attempt to leave for the more developed EU states and are often subject to repeated deportations. This specific type of migration, with its intricate dynamic of periods of mobility and immobility, has been highlighted by Picozza (2017) in the discussion of the so-called “dublinability”, involving the “Dubliner” as a particular type of border crosser who is “stuck in transit” or “caught in mobility”. Hess (2012: 436) argues that, instead of stopping movements altogether, the European border regime transforms border regions into zones of heightened circulation. Valenta et al. (2015: 111) note that “migrants end up in Croatia due to circumstances beyond their control and become reluctant asylum seekers who feel trapped in the country and aspire to leave”. Additionally, they point to “the tension between aspirations to continue the journey and restricted opportunities to translate this into practice” (Valenta et al., 2015: 111). Faced with this, some migrants decide to forge new plans and life trajectories in the countries that were once merely transit points. Thus, migration routes are becoming increasingly variegated, fragmented and non-linear. Consequently, they give rise to novel forms of migrants’ place-making practices.

The article’s starting point is the observation that many so-called “transit migrants” on the Balkan route who were interviewed in Zagreb ended up staying for longer periods in a country they often had not even known existed prior to their arrival. The aim is to juxtapose various strands in migration theory that could assist in conceptualising novel patterns of mobility and immobility emerging as migrants’ trajectories intersect with border regimes and localities en route. After reviewing relevant concepts such as “stuckness”, “waiting”, “permanent temporariness”, “limbo”, and “liminality” that describe migrants’ ways of moving and staying, lying between temporary and permanent, the article develops the concept of “precarious emplacement”.

² Many other migrants are deported further to countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. This reversed eastward direction of movement, enabled by the Dublin and EURO-DAC regulations, has been referred to as the “counter-corridor” (Hameršak and Pleše, 2018: 22).

The suggested conceptual framework builds on approaches in migration studies that understand mobility and immobility not as opposing concepts but rather as mutually constructed (Franquesa, 2011: 1016; Glick Schiller and Salazar, 2013: 193; Baas and Yeoh, 2019). This concept highlights that migration is an experience embedded in places with their own histories and other residents instead of occurring in an abstract “space of flows” (cf. Castells, 2009; Smith, 2005: 6–7).

The article emphasises the ways in which migration is shaped by temporality, where phenomena such as tempo, velocity and waiting influence its outcome (Griffiths et al., 2013; Cwerner, 2001; Jacobsen et al., 2020). Specifically, it does so by foregrounding the role of protracted temporariness in the relationship between migration, borders and places on the route.

Based on participant observation and in-depth interviews with migrants from countries such as Syria, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Nigeria, as well as with local residents in the city of Zagreb during the period between 2017 and 2019, the article proposes the concept of “precarious emplacement”. This concept captures some of the ambivalences between migration and settlement, temporariness and permanence, as well as social inclusion and exclusion, as migrants begin to form relations and affective attachments to a new place and its residents. “Precarious emplacement” draws attention to the fact that precarity is a crucial aspect of migrant emplacement in Zagreb. By this, I mean that the practices involved in settling, along with the social interactions with other residents engaged in these practices, occur in conditions of uncertainty and social marginalisation. This is mainly due to the long and difficult period of waiting for asylum in the reception centre Hotel Porin in the Dugave neighbourhood, located on the urban periphery where the fieldwork was conducted. Thus, the concept of “precarious emplacement” encompasses the ways in which precarity influences migrants’ experiences, especially in the sense of undermining the permanence of settling. It also points to how precarity permeates the fabric of post-war and post-socialist urban spaces and the relations migrants move through and come to inhabit on the EU periphery, where employment opportunities are limited.

Although the proposed framework applies to many aspects of migrants settling in other former Yugoslav states, this article focuses on Croatia as a case in point. At the time when fieldwork was conducted, Zagreb was within the European Union but outside the Schengen area. This produced a dynamic of mobility and immobility that is distinct from, for example, Belgrade and Ljubljana, as well as from other cities in Europe to the west and north.

FROM MOVING TO STAYING: CONCEPTUALISING MIGRANT (IM)MOBILITIES IN TRANSIT AREAS

This article argues that the dynamic between mobility and immobility is crucial for understanding the ways migrants move or stop moving across the borderlands in the Balkans. It emphasises that migration trajectories are often fragmented into phases, entangling localities en route. Transit areas may mediate and redirect migration trajectories and migrants may transform the places where large-scale migration is prevalent. In this way, migration and place come to co-constitute each other.

Migration has traditionally been studied as moving out of the country of origin and settling in a destination country as migrants respond to so-called “push” and “pull” factors. As a result, empirical research has usually been conducted in one of the two locations, which were furthermore often conceptualised as bounded entities. This approach was later criticised as “sedentarist metaphysics” (Malkki, 1992: 31) and “methodological nationalism” under the transnational paradigm (Basch et al., 1993; Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2003). In contrast, the so-called “new mobilities paradigm” (Urry, 2000; Scheller and Urry, 2006; Cresswell, 2010) shifted the focus to movement as opposed to staticity. Anthropologists have a long history of problematising assumptions concerning the unidirectional movements of migrants, as well as ideas of rootedness (cf. Clifford, 1997). While this added more nuance, it must be emphasised that staticity and dynamicity in migration are not merely two opposing concepts. Migration has increasingly been highlighted as being more than a seamless linear form of movement. In order to develop a more thorough understanding of the dynamic of the Balkan route, the proposed conceptual framework takes scholarly approaches that understand migration trajectories as more than simple movements from point A to point B (cf. Cresswell, 2006: 2–9). As Salazar (2011: 587) states, most “actual migratory movements often occur in phases”, and this is apparent in the case of migrations on the Balkan route.

It has been argued that the new mobilities paradigm, “perhaps celebrated mobility uncritically, to the neglect of immobility as its counterpart” (Van Hear, 2014: S109). Breaking (im)mobility into phases, Van Hear (1998) discusses compulsion and choice in movement, establishing five dimensions (moving out, coming in, moving on, moving back, staying put). He suggested that “someone may experience all of these permutations of movement and non-movement over the course of a lifetime and that they could each feature different permutations of compulsion and choice” (Van Hear,

2014: S107). Franquesa (2011: 1016) understands the dichotomy of mobility/immobility dialectically, as mutually constructed poles. Similarly, the “mobility regime” concept, or the “regimes-of-mobility approach” (Glick Schiller and Salazar, 2013: 193), emphasises that migratory journeys are not only about mobility, but also about the interplay of movement and stasis and their constant and reconstituting interrelationships amid power relations. Additionally, Baas and Yeoh (2019) emphasise migration and its antonym (non-migration) not as contradistinctive phenomena but as conjoined.

As the focus of migration scholars shifted towards places other than the countries of origin and destination, studies of transit migration have proliferated (Bredeloup, 2012; Basok et al., 2015; Suter, 2012; Kimball, 2007; Richter, 2016), as these sites provide crucial insights into what may happen during the journey between departure and arrival. They also contribute to the understanding of migration as consisting of periods of mobility and immobility. What is key is that environmental and geopolitical contexts complicate how migration trajectories manifest.

In the case of migration across the Balkan route, migrants’ predominant aspirations to reach (western and northern) Europe are not easily achieved by most. Therefore, due to Frontex activities, non-European migrants are often prevented from realising their initial plans, and they end up in the Balkan borderlands. Migrants’ trajectories in the region, therefore, become fragmented and can be described as generally unstable, stepwise processes of departures and arrivals, which can evolve into unexpected destinations. This has also been emphasised by numerous researchers in different parts of the globe (Collyer, 2007; Cresswell, 2010; Salazar, 2011: 587; Schuster, 2005: 758). Hess and Kasparek (2021: 256), for example, depict migration on the Balkan route as “precarious circulation”, highlighting vulnerability and human rights abuses. These migrant arrivals are not usually linear, as migrants move and/or are deported across different countries. In addition, as will become clear below, I argue that, in additional ways, precarity permeates their trajectories even when migrants remain in one place and become longer-term residents.

Thus, in transit zones, migration trajectories fragment and assume a shape different from the ones migrants may have initially “designed” prior to departure. For example, many migrants on the Balkan route intend to reach Germany, France, or other countries where it may be easier to find employment, and where they might connect with family members, as well as with more established migrant networks and diasporic communities. Unable to

leave the place of transit and pursue these aspirations, their destinies become entangled with new and unexpected places as they build new relations with the inhabitants of transit areas. A group of scholars has employed the concept of “entangled im/mobilities” to demonstrate how mobilities of various types and paces are entangled, and how the place of arrival is intertwined with movement (Çaglar and Glick Schiller, 2018; Menet, 2020; Charmillot and Dahinden, 2021). The next section will further explore this intersection between migration and the place of transit as it discusses the concept of migrant emplacement.

Focusing on transit migration, Collyer (2007: 668) clarifies how understanding migration as consisting of “increasingly fragmented journeys” undermines “our understanding of migration as an unproblematic transition from a place of origin to a place of destination”. Instead of assuming a linear logic, “for many migrants (...) their destination is not determined when they leave home, it may change many times during the course of the journey and, whatever it is, they may never get there”. Transit migration “allows us to understand the significance of the places in-between origin and destination, and explore the often arbitrary designations of origins and destinations themselves” (Collyer, 2007: 668–669). Transit is thus one site where, in order to go beyond seeing migration as frictionless motion, we can observe how migration is mediated en route. There, we can also see the “on-going dynamic between situations of settlement and those of mobility within situations of unequal power” (Glick Schiller and Salazar, 2013: 188). In Collyer and De Haas’ (2012: 476) conceptualisation of transit migration, it occupies “a middle ground between transit as commonly interpreted used in international travel (and rarely taking more than a few hours or days) and temporary migration”. This suggests that the phenomena encompassed by the concept of “transit migration” cover a range of temporal experiences that are often not clearly delineated. In the process, as these authors point out, the intended transit countries can become countries of destination, and the other way around. For the migrants who abandoned their plans of reaching Western Europe, Croatia became a destination country in one of the periods of immobility.

When the route is intercepted, and movement is stopped or slowed down by situations such as the enforcement and strengthening of borders, countries on a route, like Croatia, become sites where former migration aspirations are re-formulated. In that sense, border checks and repeated deportations make trajectories more static or more circular than linear, transforming

migrants' aspirations. Consequently, their presence in the former area of transit becomes less ephemeral and takes on a chronic character. Migrants may change their plans and decide to stay in the country they originally intended to pass through. Carling and Collins (2018) have pointed out that aspirations in terms of migration are often unstable and open-ended, rather than being fixed at the point of departure. Regardless, it should be noted that even though they are not necessarily on the move at a given time in a transit area that may become their future new home, for migrants, it may seem that their migration has not been finalised. Rather, it is characterised by what has been termed "the on-going-ness" of migration (Erdal and Oeppen, 2018). That is, it could take multiple years to move to another country, for example, after eight years of waiting for Croatian citizenship and gaining the ability to relocate within the EU more permanently.

Thus, the interaction between migrants, borders and places of transit can play a role, as Van Hear et al. (2018: 932), in their "push-pull plus" model, call the "mediating drivers" of migration. These drivers, defined as factors that influence people's migration decisions and processes, maintain and shape migratory flows in various ways. Specifically, mediating drivers enable, facilitate, constrain, accelerate, consolidate or diminish migration. These places in between the primary destination and origin can thus transform migration, either by pausing it, redirecting the route, or even by turning migrants into residents. That is, places of transit transform migration, but migration also transforms places on the route.

Focusing on the Sahara as a significant transit area, Bredeloup (2012: 464) writes that "the notion of transit migrant is not a neutral category. On the contrary, it is used as an ideological excuse and justifies ill treatment", leaving transit migrants "bound to accept insecure jobs with very low wages in unsafe and extremely flexible conditions" while they prepare to continue their journey. The precarity induced by such conditions is present in other sites as well and is certainly the case in the Balkan region. Similarly, with regard to migration through Mexico, Basok et al. (2015) show that the concept of "transit migration" obscures the instability, circularity and unpredictability of this so-called transitory movement. This demonstrates that the concept of the "transit migrant" is not only insufficient to describe the migration on the Balkan route but can also obscure the vulnerabilities migrants experience when in one place.

As migrants' trajectories are diverted from their intended routes, transit migration may change into what has been termed involuntary immobility.

However, this period of stasis can assume various shapes and various concepts have been utilised to highlight certain dimensions of it.

BETWEEN TEMPORARINESS AND PERMANENCE

It must be emphasised that the migrant population on the Balkan route is very heterogeneous. The variety of migrants' experiences challenges the concept of a "transit migrant". Below, I review several concepts that may provide nuanced insights into the dynamics of moving through and remaining on the Balkan route.

Regarding Croatia in particular, Valenta et al. (2015) point out that many asylum seekers are feeling "trapped" and are reluctant to stay. This is akin to the concept of "stuckness" which has been discussed in relation to at least three different, though sometimes related conditions: confinement (Jefferson et al., 2019), existential immobility (Hage, 2005), and transit and involuntary immobility in border territories (Suter, 2012; Carling, 2002). All three dimensions can be observed as constituting the predicament of many migrants who have ended up in Croatia. Reception and detention centres are places of varying degrees of confinement,³ keeping migrants in a state of waiting. This hampers social and existential mobility while also preventing migration to Western Europe. Nevertheless, some migrants may have options to leave the country, such as for temporary work in another EU country, after their asylum is granted or using smuggling networks. However, they may choose to stay for various reasons. Thus, claiming they are trapped or stuck denies agency in their choice-making amid changing opportunities as time passes, even though their agency is constrained by legal status and the space for manoeuvre is relatively limited.

The concept of "waiting" (Bandak and Janeja, 2018; Jacobsen et al., 2020) encompasses similar issues to that of "stuckness". Waiting is a type of engagement with time, which can even become a way of life when it shifts from temporary to more permanent (Daas, 2016; Bandak and Janeja, 2018; Khosravi, 2021). As a conceptual lens that captures both the structural and existential dimensions of being stuck, waiting "enables us to critically approach the precariousness of existence" (Bandak and Janeja, 2018: 5). Bandak

³ For example, the reception centre for asylum seekers, Hotel Porin, located in Zagreb's Dugave neighbourhood, could be classified as a semi-open camp. Its residents are allowed to move freely but are expected to return to the hotel at a given time. They are also often subjected to room checks, creating a feeling of imprisonment that hampers the development of a sense of home.

and Janeja (2018: 3) highlight waiting as an “instrument to elicit particular forms of subjectivities, or as a weapon to make existence intolerable for certain groups”. Khosravi (2018) conceptualises this as “stolen time”, taken through a strategy of “lifetime sequestration”. In this sense, the concept of “waiting” allows us to take into account how migration dynamics change with time, but also how migrants’ aspirations and settlement outcomes are moulded by border politics.

Many who are stopped while in transit in Croatia wait there and make additional attempts to cross the border. Sometimes, however, these periods of waiting and repeated attempts to cross the border with Slovenia last much longer than initially intended. Thus, waiting transforms transit migration into a protracted period of immobility, although it does not necessarily lead to a final settlement.

In discussing transit migration, Collyer and De Haas (2012: 476) argue “that the line between permanent and temporary is largely arbitrary”, and point to “the impossibility of objectively determining when a transit migrant becomes a (semi-)permanent settler”. The blurred line between temporary and permanent has been conceptualised in different ways by a variety of authors. They include “prolonged involuntary transit” (Missbach and Tanu, 2016: 297), “long-term temporariness” (Mares, 2017), “permanent temporariness” (Boersma, 2019; Collins, 2011; Tize, 2021; Steigemann and Misselwitz, 2020) and “permanent transience” (Isin and Rygiel, 2007). These concepts encompass both a legal status and a subjective state between transience and permanence, marked by uncertainty, precarity and exclusion.

Additionally, in migration studies, the concepts of “liminality” (Turner, 1979) and “limbo” are often used to capture migrants’ experiences marked by states of “in-betweenness” pertaining to temporalities that exist between the temporary and the permanent, often correlating with legal status. In that respect, Brun and Fábos (2015) discuss the process of homemaking in protracted (or long-term) displacement, also referred to in policy literature as “protracted refugee situations”. Brun and Fábos build upon Turner’s work and apply the concept of “liminality” instead of “limbo”. They do so because “liminality” indicates “a more unsettled relationship between fixity and motion in the experience and practices of protracted displacement”, while limbo might insinuate a sense of geographical and temporal fixity (Brun and Fábos, 2015: 10) and could overemphasise periods of stasis.

In contrast, “the fixity and dead-ended-ness of migrant life on the move” guides Richter (2016: 85–86) to understand the specific type of permanent liminality of migrants living in the Maghreb region, as a “limbo”. According to her, the meaning (derived from Latin *limbus*), which denotes an edge or border, is more fitting than “liminality” as migrants “are stuck in a place defined by the borders nearby, which they cannot transgress: they are literally at the edge of Europe, outside the life they are looking for” (Richter, 2016: 82). Similar experiences are found at another edge, in the Balkans, but none of the concepts of “stuckness”, “liminality” or “limbo” can fully explain this dynamic alone.

Therefore, much like sites in Turkey (Suter, 2012), Mexico (Basok et al., 2015), Morocco (Richter, 2016) and other “transit states” (Kimball, 2007), I emphasise that the instability and unpredictability of the migratory dynamic in Croatia cannot be easily reduced to either transit migration or any of the above-mentioned concepts alone. Instead, in regions characterised by complex and changing migration patterns, I argue that these concepts should be juxtaposed and placed in dialogue with each other. This approach requires us to remain attentive to how migrants’ experiences are shaped by bordering mechanisms, moulded by social and affective relations en route, and how their aspirations change throughout their life course. When migrants slow down their movement, they often become entangled with the places they arrive in. Although they may not become permanent residents, migrants do become longer-term inhabitants of these places, and these localities become meaningful in their biographies.

In order to grasp further nuances in these interrelationships, the article proposes the concept of “emplacement”, and highlights the role of precarity in shaping its contours. This helps shed light on some of the ambiguities between temporariness and permanence, as well as mobility and immobility, taking into account the regional and local context.

PRECARIOUS EMPLACEMENT

Conceptual framework

In policy discourse, as well as in different scholarly approaches to migration, various concepts are used to describe the lives and paths of migrants after they move from their origin country. These include settlement, integration, incorporation, inclusion, staying, inhabiting, embeddedness, nesting, etc. This article proposes and builds on the concept of emplacement

because it allows more space for agency in the creation of relations while in a new place. It also enables the recognition of complexities of the place itself, which becomes entangled in migrants' trajectories when the route is intercepted, and migration is stopped or slowed down by bordering mechanisms. Furthermore, precarity allows us to investigate how being in one place is unsettled and facilitates potential secondary, tertiary, or further migrations, thus challenging the permanence of staying put.

The concept of "emplacement" refers to the phenomena occurring when migrants who stay longer become a part of city spaces as they arrive to prepare for further journeys. These spaces are often located near bus and railway stations or parks. They may also await their asylum decisions in reception centres like Hotel Porin in Zagreb's Dugave neighbourhood. Meeus et al. (2019: 1) designate these parts of the urban fabric as "arrival infrastructures", and highlight their significance in producing and negotiating future local or trans-local social mobilities. Furthermore, moving through or across space, understood as the product of social relations, allows the space to be *altered* (Massey, 2005: 118). In other words, as Lems (2016: 321) argues, by moving through places rather than indifferent spaces, people on the move "shape them and are in turn shaped by them".⁴

In refugee studies, emplacement has often been highlighted as "a flipside of displacement" (Malkki, 1995), referring to the (re)making of lives in new sociocultural environments. Korac (2009: 1), for example, explores "the lived-in worlds of refugees by focusing on the different types of connection, emerging forms of interaction, and networks of social relations through which they forge a place for themselves in a new society, create meaning and form attachments". These include the intersection of a range of "place" and "home-making" strategies (Korac-Sanderson, 2016: 32). She argues that emplacement is central to any consideration of citizenship as a social process, rather than it simply being about acquiring legal rights (Korac-Sanderson, 2016: 30). Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2015: 5) define emplacement as "the social processes through which a dispossessed individual builds or rebuilds networks of connection within the constraints and opportunities of a specific city". Besteman (2016: 285) conceives emplacement as the "many ways migrants experience and engage with places", learning to navigate a new society, and understanding "how things work" there.

⁴ Similarly, Smith (2005: 6–7) cautions against the macro-analytic view that transnational mobility occurs in a hyper-mobile "space of flows", and suggests instead that transnational practices take place within a historically mediated context, which "forces us to think about the emplacement of mobile subjects".

This article argues that after transit, emplacement in Zagreb cannot be equated with stasis-in-place or settlement. As Kleinman (2019: 17–18) stresses, emplacement can be developed through dwelling, creating networks, and attempting to produce value, even if a person is not fully settled. Furthermore, for the migrants themselves, being and becoming-of-place is often characterised by simultaneous inclusion in some social spheres and exclusion from others. This has been termed “differential inclusion” (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015: 79; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Skleparis, 2016), which prevents the development of a more connected social experience, leads to social marginalisation and may even facilitate further migration. “Precarious emplacement”, therefore, highlights that settling in this context is marked by differential inclusion and is not necessarily permanent.

The city of Zagreb is one example of migrant emplacement that is marked by uncertainty, which undermines practices of settling. The impermanence is brought about, for example, by the mechanisms of the border regime, such as the long and difficult process of granting asylum, the processes of racialisation in the city (discrimination and other forms of social hostility), and exposure to precarity that structures workplaces, welfare and the rental market, affecting the dynamics between moving and staying in the country. Moreover, on the European periphery, migrant emplacement is characterised by overlapping precarities. Firstly, migrants are precarious in a way distinct from the majority of Croatian citizens. They are in a state of waiting, either to move further or to obtain asylum, enduring prolonged periods of uncertainty due to their legal status. Additionally, they face social and spatial exclusion from the rest of the population in reception centres. Secondly, the realities of post-socialist and post-war Croatia produce precarities even for Croatian citizens, which are distinct from those in more prosperous countries of the EU. These circumstances result in further vulnerabilities that migrants may experience while seeking employment, housing, or health care.

Butler (2009: 25) argues that “precarity designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death”.⁵ Precarity is usually understood as an effect of what has been called Post-Fordism. This denotes changes in the system of economic

⁵ Butler contrasts “precarity” with “precariousness”, with the latter referring to the corporeal vulnerability shared by all mortals, not only the poor and disenfranchised.

production and the nature of the workforce, as well as the flexibilisation and multiplication of labour since the early 1970s, when part-time, temporary, seasonal and other “non-standard” forms of work started to predominate, resulting in increased heterogeneity, uncertainty, vulnerability and anxiety. These transformations took place in Croatia parallel to the dissolution of state socialism, the introduction of capitalism, and Europeanisation.⁶ Biti and Senjković (2021: 7) identify flexibilisation, precarisation, deindustrialisation, privatisation and crony capitalism as some of the markers of post-industrialist and post-transition Croatia.

Precarity has also been investigated as an important dimension of post-socialist transition, especially on the peripheries of capitalism (Kojanić, 2020; Suchland, 2021). The Yugoslav system of social security was already shaken in the 1980s but was further damaged during the privatisation period of the 1990s, which coincided with the war (Hromadžić and Zgaljardić, 2019). Račić et al. (2005: 51) highlight a significant rise in temporary labour in Croatia between the 1990s and 2010s. Becic et al. (2019) further indicate how precarious employment plays a part in the emigration of Croatian citizens to countries like Germany, Austria or Ireland. This precarious landscape also affects new migrants who had partially or fully settled in Croatia, albeit in a different way.

This article combines the concepts of precarity and emplacement, and several other scholars have made similar attempts. Hinkson (2017) discusses “precarious placemaking”, while Castillo (2015) examines place-making under conditions of uncertainty. In describing “various (usually transient) emplacements” (Castillo, 2015: 288) of migrants, he introduces the concept of “precarious homing”. Precarity has long been understood as a significant dimension of migrants’ lives (Standing, 2011: 124; Basok et al., 2015; Schierup and Jørgensen, 2016). Migrants often experience vulnerability that affects various aspects of everyday life, including their legal status, employment opportunities, access to basic services, and overall well-being. However, there are not many studies that conceptually connect migrants’ distinct precarity to the broader structures of precarity in transit areas while being attentive to the spatial and temporal ambiguities of emplacement, as proposed by this article.

⁶ However, unlike most of Eastern Europe, Croatia entered the period of transition in the shadow of a bloody war for national independence which led to experiences with displaced persons.

“Precarious emplacement” in Zagreb

The migrants I met during fieldwork in Zagreb⁷ had very different journeys to Croatia and aspired to settle in different countries. Many were, however, open to staying in Croatia provided their asylum requests were granted and they could find work that enabled a decent living standard. While their biographies were very particular, there were common threads. A good example is Reza, an Iranian man in his thirties, who arrived in Croatia alone after fleeing persecution. When I asked whether he would like to stay in Croatia, Reza replied, “I would like to stay here ... for now”. This is an answer I would often hear among asylum seekers and asylees. The aspiration to stay “for now” referred to the fact that it was useful to remain in Croatia in the short term, but it was neither ideal nor likely permanent. Reza was not in transit, but neither had he completely settled, although he was open to the possibility. His plans and motivations varied each time we met, depending on his legal status, everyday experiences in Croatia, relationships he formed, as well as his emotional state. In one conversation, he evaluated his options and scenarios while he waited at Hotel Porin for asylum and was learning the Croatian language, something that the majority of migrants did not do. He said:

But I do not waste my time. I try to use this opportunity to learn something and have some achievement. So, if I get a negative decision, I didn't lose anything. I can go to another country and show my experience and evidence, and another country may accept me ... If I get a positive decision, and if I get citizenship or [temporary] residence permit, but I need permanent resident permit in the EU. If I get residence, I have the opportunity to work anywhere, like Arab Gulf states. So I can figure out what to do ... What should be the next step. (...) I am just a little bit worried about money, because I want to leave the country if I get a negative, so I need money to leave. So I am focused on my job permit, finding the job and save money for ... if everything negative happens. I must prepare myself for everything today, because I am not sure about the positive decision of the government. So, it depends. If I feel like I can get a positive and change the

⁷ The fieldwork for this research consisted of participant observation and around 80 semi-structured interviews with migrants and other city residents of various ages, genders, nationalities, legal statuses and education levels. It was based on non-probability judgment sampling and snowballing. However, the majority of participants in this study were men, which reflected the demographics of migrants in Zagreb. The length of these interviews varied from a couple of minutes to more than an hour or even two hours. The interviews were conducted in English or Croatian, depending on the language skills of the interlocutors. For example, Reza initially conversed in English but gradually started to incorporate Croatian words as time passed.

negative decision to positive, yes, I will pay the lawyer to defend, but if I don't feel it, I will leave.

The intricate interplay between mobility and immobility in Reza's migration trajectory was also apparent when I interviewed him after he received asylum. Eventually, after some years, he did go further abroad and it is not clear if he will return to Croatia. The example of learning Croatian shows that language proficiency has multiple aims, some involving transit and some involving staying. It would have helped Reza to work in Zagreb and accrue cultural and economic capital, which would be useful for both further transit and more permanent emplacement. Together with making friends and later getting married in Croatia, language learning and living in the city for a longer period than initially intended reflect Reza's active engagement with the local environment during the period of immobility.

Thus, like many others, Reza's example of remaining in Croatia fits the concept of emplacement. Moreover, the uncertain legal status, extended temporariness, limited work opportunities, social exclusion, economic concerns and the emotional strain of living in uncertainty indicate that his emplacement is precarious. The state of work opportunities and the lack of safety nets are significantly influenced by his legal status, but also by the more general social processes that shape life in post-socialist Zagreb. However, migrants in Croatia experience precarity in various other ways beyond their legal status and waiting period. Access to resources and rights such as housing, education, and healthcare were frequently referenced in interviews as contributing to their overall vulnerability and marginalisation. Additionally, discrimination, negative stereotypes, institutional racism, labour market exploitation and limited networks of social support can exacerbate the precarity.

"Precarious emplacement" highlights the nuanced and multifaceted experiences of migrants in Croatia, particularly in relation to their interaction with the place that becomes more than a mere transit point. This concept emphasises the limitations of the traditional "transit migration" framework in fully capturing the complex dynamics of migrants' (i)mmobility. "Precarious emplacement" acknowledges the temporal ambivalences, as well as the spatial ones, such as being differentially included. On the one hand, migrants might face marginalisation and be banned from entering certain spaces like nightclubs or buses. On the other hand, they may forge connections with other emplaced migrants and the local community, creating a sense of belonging. The concept also emphasises how migrants' trajectories

intersect with border regimes, localities and their histories⁸, and policies en route. Additionally, it highlights that precarity experienced on the local level may facilitate further migration.

Concepts such as “stuckness”, “waiting”, “liminality”, and “limbo” provide valuable insights into certain aspects of migrants’ experiences in Croatia. However, the concept of “precarious emplacement” surpasses them by encompassing a broader range of factors, accounting for the influence of the local context, and providing a more holistic understanding of their predicament. It highlights the dynamic interplay between legal restrictions, personal agency, historical circumstances, and local dynamics, offering a more comprehensive lens through which to analyse and interpret the complex journeys through Croatia, its borders, and its social fabric.

CONCLUSION

This article argues that Croatia is evolving beyond being merely a transit country for the increasing numbers of migrants on the Balkan route. Many migrants do not plan to stay in Croatia or are reluctant to do so after becoming stuck by border enforcement. The violence committed by the border regime against migrants during their precarious journeys, including the increasing practice of pushbacks (Hameršak, 2021), should not be overlooked. However, for some migrants, being stuck in Croatia was also a period during which they could re-evaluate their options for migration, and experience an unexpected new beginning.

Croatia has been presented as an example of a site where previous migration aspirations are re-formulated as migrants encounter various types of bordering mechanisms that decelerate migration and begin developing relations with other residents in the localities that intersect with the migrants’ pathways. To grasp this changing dynamic, it has been foregrounded that the relationship between phases of mobility and immobility is crucial for migrant place-making, whether temporary or more permanent. To that end, the article reviewed concepts such as “stuckness”, “waiting”, “permanent temporariness”, “limbo”, and “liminality”, which may help shed light

⁸ Croatia’s history is marked by its geopolitical positioning on the European periphery, the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and subsequent conflicts in the 1990s that displaced many citizens and produced ethnic homogenisation. The concept of precarious emplacement considers how migrants become entangled in these complex post-war and post-socialist dynamics, whether by navigating state bureaucracy or facing social hostility from citizens towards racialised minorities.

on the experiences of some migrants or certain phases of their journeys. However, it cautioned that additional dynamics may remain occluded if we do not expand the conceptual framework.

Therefore, the article presented the concept of “precarious emplacement” with the aim of surpassing the limited utility of “transit” as a lens to understand the emerging patterns of (im)mobility on the Balkan route. This concept highlights that settling is not necessarily permanent, and that it involves negotiating uncertain conditions and facing social marginalisation. It also highlights how migrants’ experiences intertwine with the local context and sheds light on the intricate interplay of individual, socio-cultural, historical, geopolitical, and economic factors. In order to move beyond the concept of “transit migrant” in the analysis of the dynamic on the Balkan route, studies of non-European migration in these geographical areas should be attentive to the following: 1) migration consists of periods of both mobility and immobility, often in response to bordering mechanisms; 2) migrants’ aspirations are often susceptible to change en route; 3) migration trajectories are entangled in spaces of transit areas; 4) migration is a temporal experience; time spent in the transit area opens possibilities to forge relationships crucial for a more permanent form of place-making; 5) migration is an affective experience, that is, the ties and emotional attachment that may relate migrants to a new place could prevent further migration.

Limiting the range of migrant (im)mobilities in the Balkans merely to the concept of “transit migration” also has political implications. It can obscure the vulnerabilities migrants experience when in one place, similar to what has been observed in other transit areas like Mexico and the Sahara. Therefore, the conceptual intervention presented in this article aims to create room for discussing various experiences of disenfranchisement, subjugation and resistance that migrants face when they remain in one place, regardless of the length of their stay.

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Nesigurno smještanje u Hrvatskoj: konceptualizacija više-od-prolaznih migracija na Balkanskoj ruti

Igor Petričević

SAŽETAK

U radu se raspravlja o tome da se dinamika migracija na Balkanskoj ruti mijenja u nešto više od tranzita. Hrvatska je predstavljena kao primjer mjesta gdje se nekadašnje migracijske težnje redefinišu jer se migranti susreću s različitim mehanizmima granične kontrole koji usporavaju migraciju te počinju razvijati odnose s drugim stanovnicima. Autor tvrdi da su dinamika mobilnosti i nepokretnosti, kao i načini na koje se one isprepleću na putu, ključni za razumijevanje promjenjivih migracijskih obrazaca na Balkanu. Daje se pregled pojmova kao što su »zaglavljenost«, »čekanje«, »trajna privremenost«, »limbo« i »liminalnost«, koji opisuju načine na koje se migranti kreću između privremenog i stalnog pokreta te boravka. Dodatno, članak razvija koncept

»nesigurnog smještaja« kako bi se pomaknuo dalje od tranzita i uhvatio dvosmislenosti između preseljenja i ostanka, privremenosti i trajnosti te uključivanja i isključivanja. Koncept naglašava da se prakse vezane uz naseljavanje, zajedno s društvenim interakcijama s drugim stanovnicima koji su s njima povezani, odvijaju u uvjetima neizvjesnosti i društvene marginalizacije. Nesigurno smještanje obuhvaća načine na koje nesigurnost prožima iskustva migranata te poslijeratne i postsocijalističke urbane prostore i odnose kroz koje prolaze i dolaze ih nastaniti. Članak zaključuje tvrdnjom da, s obzirom na heterogenost životnih putanja migranata, koncept »tranzitnog migranata« može prikriti ranjivosti koje migranti doživljavaju tijekom razdoblja nepokretnosti te se zalaže za nijansiraniji konceptualni pristup.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: Balkanska ruta, Hrvatska, migrant, migracije u tranzitu, (ne)pokretnost, nesigurno smještanje