



The Variegated *Game* of Border Crossing Along the *Balkan Route*

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Abstract

This article explores recent migration flows along the Balkan Route through the conceptual lens of “The Game,” a metaphor used by migrants to describe their border-crossing experiences. Employing a multi-level analytical approach, we examine the interplay between structural factors, social networks, and individual experiences that shape migration patterns and decisions. The concept of the “Variegated Game” along the “Balkan Route” captures the multiple facets of contemporary irregular border crossings, underscoring the continuum between autonomy and control, between solidarity and exploitation, and between risk and reward in contemporary irregular migration.

Introduction

The “Balkan Route”¹ has long served as a crucial migratory transit corridor and geopolitical space connecting the East and the West. Its significance in cross-border mobility has been continuously reshaped by key historical events and modern developments (Edmonda 2018: 205; Hameršak et al. 2020; Bergesio and Bialasiewicz 2023: 40–42).² Recent

¹ The “Balkan Route” encompasses two main migration pathways: the Eastern Mediterranean Sea Route from Turkey to Greece and the overland Western Balkan Route, which spans Albania, Northern Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, before reaching EU member states such as Croatia, Bulgaria, and Romania (BVMN n.d.). The terms “Balkan Route,” “Balkan corridor,” and “Balkan Circuit” are often used interchangeably to denote a transit zone characterized by blurred distinctions between entry and exit points (Hameršak et al. 2020).

² Since the late nineteenth century, the Balkans served as a significant route for migratory movements. Early infrastructure projects, including the Paris-Istanbul Orient Express (1883) and the Berlin-Baghdad railway (1903–1940), facilitated these movements. During World War II, the Middle East Relief and Refugee Administration redirected European refugees towards the Middle East. In the post-war period, the Yugoslav Highway of Brotherhood and Unity facilitated migration from Istanbul and Athens to Austria

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migration flows along the route reveal a complex and dynamic narrative characterized by diverse patterns, varying intensities, and shifting directionalities. Discourse and perceptions of the “Balkan Route” often convey a cultural narrative of inherent regional criminality, a portrayal utilized as a policy tool to justify direct violence against migrants (El-Shaarawi and Razsa 2019; Augustová 2023).³ The literature on the “Balkan Route” forms a substantial part of Balkan Studies (Jano 2023: 808), highlighting the region’s enduring importance in global migration flows. This scholarly focus intensified during the so-called “European Refugee Crisis,” which saw a surge in mixed migration flows along the route. During this period, the route transitioned from a (semi-)open corridor to a network of “underground” migratory paths, garnering scholarly attention on various aspects including the geography of routes and camps, the impact of European Union (EU) border externalization and securitization policies, the role of smugglers, the violence along the route, and the experiences of migrants and refugees (Minca and Collins 2021: 4).

As the complexities of migration along the “Balkan Route” have evolved, so too has the terminology used to describe these journeys. One term that has gained prominence is “The Game,” which encapsulates the multifaceted nature of irregular border crossings in the region. The term “Game” serves as an exploratory metaphor,⁴ capturing the different actors involved and the varied migration journeys along the “Balkan Route”. It represents the complex network of irregular border crossings, with migrants and facilitators (such as solidarity actors, community elders, hawala brokers,⁵ and smugglers) playing central roles in shaping the journey’s trajectory. Additionally, state authorities, migration policies, and labor markets, though indirectly, also contribute to “The Game.” To understand “The Game” in greater depth, this article employs a multi-level analytical framework that integrates macro, mezzo, and micro perspectives. This approach aims to map the various manifestations of “The Game” at institutional, social, and individual levels. It examines the interplay between policy measures, social networks, and personal agency, highlighting the negative outcomes—such as violence, exploitation, and psychosocial distress—that shape the everyday realities of irregular migration along the “Balkan Route.”

The exact origin of the term “Game” in the context of border crossing is challenging to pinpoint (Mucko et al. 2022), but it likely emerged around 2015 during a surge in migration

Footnote 2 (Continued)

and Germany. Moreover, significant refugee movements toward EU countries occurred following the fall of communism and during the conflicts in the Balkans in the 1990s (Hameršak et al. 2020).

³ Since the 1970s, law enforcement agencies have identified the Balkans as a major route for illicit activities and smuggling from East to West (Scaturro 2022).

⁴ For a discussion on the power of metaphor and its significant role in framing and shaping our understanding and discourse around migration, influencing public opinion, policy-making, and academic discussions, see Herman (2006: 192–193).

⁵ One of the central features of smuggling operations along the Balkan routes is the use of *Hawala* networks. These networks operate as informal, trust-based systems that enable quick and anonymous transactions across regions. The term “Hawala” (or *Havaleh*, *Xawala*, *Xawilaad*, *Hundi*) refers to an informal money transfer system used outside formal banking channels, relying on trust and personal relationships between *hawaladars* (hawala brokers). Despite regional differences in terminology, these systems facilitate the transfer of money without the physical movement of cash, with brokers holding the funds until the service is completed, thereby maintaining trust and ensuring the transaction’s success (Triandafyllidou 2018: 217; Vještica and Dragojević 2021: 7).

flows from Pakistan.⁶ Associated with sports or play, the term may have been used by smugglers to explain border-crossing activities to children or coined by the children themselves to describe their attempts to cross borders irregularly (Vještica and Dragojević 2021: 37). The term quickly gained popularity among migrants from various nationalities along the “Balkan Route,” transcending its English origins and being incorporated into other languages. Words like *geymzadan* (Farsi) and *geymwahel* (Pashto), derived from the English word “game,” are now used to denote the act of crossing borders “illegally” (Vještica and Dragojević 2021: 37). Despite the diversity of native languages, “game” has become a widely recognized term, especially in interactions with smugglers and aid providers (Augustová 2021: 203). However, despite its seemingly playful connotation, “The Game” encapsulates severe, traumatic, and life-threatening experiences faced daily by migrants, often resulting in death (Vještica and Dragojević 2021: 24; Minca and Collins 2021; Zocchi 2023: 2). As one key informant from Belgrade noted, “They come back to our centers from ‘the game’ beaten, sometimes from the police and sometimes from those who organize smugglers” (Morland 2023: 47). Central to “The Game” is the systematic and organized violence perpetrated primarily by state authorities during pushbacks and detentions, which often surpasses the abuse inflicted by smugglers (MSF 2017; BVMN n.d.; Morland 2023: 47; Augustová 2021: 210). Nearly a third of migrants and refugees experience violence, with state authorities responsible for over half of these cases (Arsenijević 2017: 6).

This article examines the multifaceted nature of irregular border crossings and the interplay between structural, social, and individual factors influencing migration patterns along the “Balkan Route” through the lens of various “Game” metaphors. It aims to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of contemporary irregular migration dynamics by emphasizing migrants’ experiences and the vernacular language they use to conceptualize their journeys. To explore the complex conceptual and empirical dynamics of “The Game,” we draw on qualitative fieldwork conducted in various locations, including Belgrade, Tirana, and Sarajevo, between 2015 and 2019. This research is complemented by a review of diverse academic literature, reports from non-governmental organizations, and media articles focusing on “The Game” of irregular border crossing along the “Balkan Route.” Following this introduction, the first section outlines the conceptual and theoretical discussion, providing an analytical framework to study and understand “The Game.” Based on this framework, we then elaborate on how “Game(s)” manifest at institutional, social, and individual levels. We conclude by discussing potential avenues for further research.

The Variegated Game: Conceptualizing Irregular Border Crossing Along the Balkan Route

The “Game” metaphor is not new in border studies. Introduced in the late 1980s to describe the back-and-forth border crossing along the Mexico-United States border, the “Cat-and-Mouse Game” analogy remains relevant, though now it reflects a more complex and

⁶ Although migration from Pakistan along the “Balkan Route” existed before 2015, post-2015 migration flows represent a “new wave.” Most migrants originated from Mandi Bahauddin, a city in Punjab, Pakistan’s largest and impoverished rural province. The so-called “Mandi boys,” predominantly young men in their twenties, are credited with popularizing the term “Game,” proudly claiming to be “the first to go to the game.” For these adolescent boys and young adults, “The Game” symbolized their defiance against socio-economic disenfranchisement. They perceived borders, which simultaneously confined and excluded them, as obstacles to be overcome, determined to succeed at any cost.

perilous reality involving a wider range of actors and increased risks of injury and death (Donato et al. 2008: 331–333). Digital technologies have intensified the interplay between migrants' ability to navigate and evade border controls and authorities' capacity to detect and intercept them (Andersson 2012: 10; Augustová 2023).

In addition to the “Cat-and-Mouse Game” analogy (Hromadžić 2020: 177; Rydzewski 2024: 120), migrants employ various other game metaphors to describe their experiences along the “Balkan Route.” Three board game metaphors, in particular, illustrate the challenges, uncertainties, and hopes of their journeys. The “Snakes and Ladders Game” metaphor captures the experience of encountering sudden setbacks, akin to when “the snake bites,” compelling migrants “to go back down and try again” (MSF 2017: 9; Altin 2021: 593; Šantić et al. 2021: 530). The “Goose Game” metaphor reflects the cyclical nature of border crossing attempts, characterized by repeated returns to the point of origin, enforced “waiting periods” of immobility analogous to skipped turns, and the unpredictable progression of the journey, governed by chance and external factors (Edmonda 2018: 194). Finally, the “Ludo Game” metaphor represents the blend of chance and strategy involved in their journeys, where “waiting periods” and navigating obstacles are hoped to lead toward the desired destination (Bittel and Monsutti 2022: 471). Each of these gaming analogies emphasizes different aspects of risk, strategy, and chance integral to the migrants' journeys.

The perception of “The Game” varies among different stakeholders. Migrants' narratives often depict themes of difficult journeys, bodily injury, survival struggles, fear, and death, yet also convey a sense of hope (Jovanović 2018; Minca and Collins 2021: 5; Rydzewski 2024). Humanitarian organizations and the media frequently frame irregular migration along the “Balkan Route” as a “Game of Violence,” emphasizing the continuous severe violence and pushbacks by state authorities (BVMN n.d.; MSF 2017; BCHR, MYLA and Oxfam 2017; NNK 2024). In contrast, official narratives focus on the “Game of Risk” and “Number Games,” portraying migrants as both *at risk* and *risky*, thereby amplifying the perceived migratory threat and justifying increasingly restrictive and externalized policy measures based on higher migrant numbers (Vollmer 2011; Andersson 2012). Academic discourse has added deeper layers of meaning to “The Game,” conceptualizing it not only as a vernacular term signifying repeated border crossings (Mitrović et al. 2020) but also as a spatial tactic employed by migrants to navigate the impossibility of legally entering their desired destination countries (Minca and Collins 2021). Moreover, “The Game” has been interpreted as a rite of passage involving elements of liminality, risk, social pressure, reciprocity, self-transcendence, and solidarity networks, contributing to a transformative journey and new identity status (Altin 2021). More recent scholarship frames “The Game” as a set of ritualized, repetitive, and relational practices that simultaneously contribute to and resist exhaustion and subversion along the route (Zocchi 2023).

The theoretical discourse on irregular migration reveals a multifaceted interplay among macro-structural systems, economic incentives, social networks, and psychosocial factors. Scholars argue that the modern expansion of the “migration industry” is both a result of and a catalyst for restrictive immigration and repressive border management policies (Castles 2003: 15; Mandić 2017: 28). The “illegal side” of this “industry,” namely human smuggling and trafficking, often takes center stage in discussions. The business model, introduced by Salt and Stein (1997), views human smuggling as a transnational, profit-oriented service industry encompassing various phases, from mobilization to *en route* movement and integration into destination societies, involving diverse actors, including government officials. While economic drivers are significant, social network theory highlights the

crucial role of social capital and personal networks in shaping migration dynamics (Herman 2006: 198). In irregular migration corridors, new social networks and temporary alliances often emerge, serving as sources of support and assistance, but they can also involve relations of exploitation and domination (Scheel 2019: 82). Complementing the business and social network models, the behavioral model offers valuable insights into the psycho-social dimensions of migration intentions, placing individual agency at the forefront (Groenewold et al. 2012). Socio-psychological and cultural factors, including social pressures, cultural values, and personal attachments, significantly influence the risk-taking behaviors and aspirations of irregular migrants in their pursuit of goals (Kaur and Kaur 2024).

The “Variegated Game” of irregular border crossing and the interconnected factors driving it, necessitate a multifaceted approach. To conceptually and empirically understand and study “The Game” along the “Balkan Route,” we propose three analytical dimensions, as illustrated in Scheme 1:

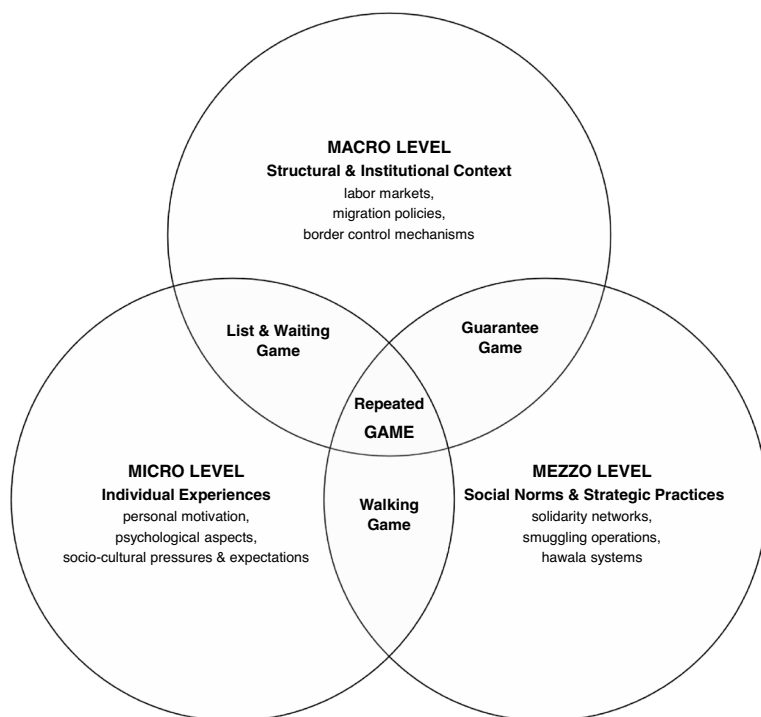
- a. *Structural and Institutional Context*: This dimension refers to the macro-level factors that shape the environment in which “The Game” takes place, including labor markets, migration policies, and border control mechanisms.
- b. *Social Norms and Strategic Practices*: This dimension encompasses the mezzo-social level, focusing on solidarity networks, smuggling operations, and hawala systems that facilitate or hinder irregular migration.
- c. *Individual Experiences*: This dimension represents the micro-individual level, accounting for personal motivations, psychological aspects, and socio-cultural expectations and pressures that influence individual decisions and behaviors.

The interplay between these dimensions yields various “Games” with specific rules, strategies, actors, and distinct outcomes and risks. Scheme 1 also reflects the variegated nature of “The Game,” depicting how the different “Games” are nested within the various analytical dimensions. The “Repeated Game,” at the center, implies continuity and highlights how multiple attempts to cross borders influence and are influenced by all other “Games.”

The Institutionalized Game

Structural and systemic factors play a crucial role in the dynamics of modern slavery, particularly within labor markets.⁷ The complex socio-political landscape of migration governance involves sending, receiving, and transit countries, each contributing to a system that benefits from an irregular and mobile workforce. Sending countries benefit from remittances while receiving countries exploit migrant labor within the informal economy, including small businesses and multinational corporations. Turkey’s historical reliance on cheap labor from Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe, has been further leveraged by the influx of Syrian refugees, who predominantly remain in the informal labor market (Toksoz et al. 2012). This scenario benefits Turkish businesses and, indirectly, transnational

⁷ Modern slavery, intrinsically linked to contemporary migration, involves the commodification of people or labor, and remains a persistent issue across various regions and economic contexts. For more on the complex relationships between contemporary forms of slavery and irregular migration, and how structural inequalities and economic pressures can trap migrants in exploitative situations, see Davidson (2013).



Scheme 1 The variegated *Game* of border crossing along the *Balkan Route*

corporations through the exploitation of migrant workers. As one Syrian migrant observed, “Syrian workers are very cheap for Turkish employers. [...] Money is a big deal for Turkish employers. When it comes to money, they will do everything not to lose it” (Badalić 2023: 974). Similarly, Serbia’s labor shortages, especially in large-scale construction projects, have led to the recruitment of workers from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam, often through exploitative agencies that charge extortionate fees for work visas and misrepresent working conditions, leading to potential human trafficking (Dragojlo 2021). These examples illustrate how (ir)regular migration via employment agencies for low-paid and unskilled seasonal work can often result in exploitation and human trafficking. Political economy scholars argue that forced labor and human trafficking are not exceptions but common features of modern-day capitalism, with state practices and immigration regulations contributing to migrants’ vulnerability (Fabbri et al. 2023).

These structural and systemic factors are further exacerbated by Europe’s migration governance. Human rights marginalization and violations, the criminalization of migration and solidarity, hostile public narratives, and restrictive migration policies coupled with specific border practices like the “List Game” and “Waiting Game” (see subsection below) all exemplify the systemic failures and ethical concerns in migration governance along the “Balkan Routes,” further perpetuating exploitation and human smuggling. Migration governance, skewed towards security at the expense of humanitarian concerns, reflects a failure to institutionalize solidarity. This shift is also reflected in the transition of public narratives from sympathetic to hostile, resulting in restrictions on civil society’s ability to aid irregular migrants through both official and unofficial bans (Zoppi and Puleri 2021: 582). Assistance

to migrants is often perceived as facilitating irregular movement and indirectly aiding smuggling operations, leading to the dismantling of squats and ad hoc prohibitions on the distribution of food and non-food items by solidarity actors. Paradoxically, since the 2016 de facto closure of the route, state reception facilities in “hotspots” like Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina have become the main points for migrants to stay before leaving to “go to the game.” Smugglers continue their operations, often very openly and with impunity, living among migrants in these facilities, thus becoming key actors in managing the flow.

The criminalization of migration and solidarity, while smugglers continue to move people, has led to severe human rights violations for undocumented migrants, who are seen as having fewer rights due to their “criminal act” of entering a country “illegally.” While civil society actors strive to provide necessary access to rights and services, the criminalization of solidarity activities severely limits their support, undermining international humanitarian law and signed conventions meant to protect undocumented migrants. Authorities frequently fail to uphold international and European legal standards while practicing push-backs and issuing collective expulsion orders and bans (BCHR 2017; NNK 2024). The institutional measures implemented to manage the influx of migrants have exposed both a significant unpreparedness to address the escalating crisis and a strategic, “chessboard-like” approach that circumvents binding international conventions related to the rights of irregular migrants. The “imposition of waiting,” which compels migrants to endure prolonged periods of uncertainty, has become a central aspect of state politics within the context of “The Game” (Rydzewski 2024).

From the “List Game” to the “Waiting Game”...

The EU-Turkey Deal of March 2016 formally closed the “Balkan Route,” escalating border violence and resulting in the systematic denial of asylum rights (Milivojević 2019; BVMN n.d.). The aim of this deal was to process asylum requests in Turkey, thereby keeping asylum-seekers outside EU territories. However, the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) criticized this arrangement, arguing that it outsourced the EU’s responsibilities, dehumanized refugees, and exemplified a failed asylum policy lacking solidarity within the EU.⁸

Similarly, the “Hungarian List” emerged in response to the significant influx of refugees at the Serbian-Hungarian border (Mitrović et al. 2020: 48). Initially created by migrants in September 2015 as an unofficial list to manage their waiting to be admitted into the border zone, it was later “adopted” by the authorities (see Rydzewski 2024: 102). The list was intended to serve as a negotiated solution between migrants, “community leaders,”⁹ and the Hungarian and Serbian authorities to establish the (supposed) chronological order of

⁸ The European Council on Refugees and Exiles criticized the EU-Turkey Deal, stating, “The EU is thus outsourcing its responsibilities to protect refugees to Turkey, an immoral move which allows it to circumvent its obligations under international and European asylum and human rights law. Trading in people is the dehumanizing expression of a failed European asylum policy and of the lack of solidarity within the EU. The proposal to create safe areas within Syria as a long-term solution for refugees risks taking the logic of containment to the extreme.” (ECRE 2016).

⁹ In the pre-transit unofficial camps, Hungarian authorities “appointed community leaders” among the residents, preferably selecting men from the Middle East, ideally from Syria, who spoke English. These leaders were granted certain “privileges,” such as access to electricity and exemption from detention, in exchange for managing “The List.” They had the “authority” to change or rearrange the order of names on a list (Rydzewski 2024: 102).

who should enter Hungary through official channels (Minca and Collins 2021: 9), resembling the EU-Turkey Deal. During the “List Game,” migrants were required to register their personal details on the list and stay in the unofficial pre-transit camps to secure their place, as the wait time and admission were unpredictable. However, the “List Game” quickly became controversial, and its effectiveness diminished over time due to issues of management, transparency, inefficiency, and corruption. “Community leaders” and law enforcement officers were often corrupted and unreliable, substituting the names of migrants who didn’t show up with those who paid them (Rydzewski 2024: 103). These issues could not be properly addressed due to the List’s unofficial and legally dubious status. Towards the final phase of the “Hungarian List,” asylum-seekers were held in detention zones awaiting decisions, and if their asylum applications were rejected, they were returned to Serbia. After the dismissal of the “Hungarian List,” asylum-seekers in Serbia began submitting their claims to the Hungarian embassy, adding another layer of outsourced obligations. Its restrictive nature and bureaucratic hurdles, coupled with prolonged waiting periods, transformed the “List Game” into what migrants refer to as the “Waiting Game” (Minca and Collins 2021: 9), “because it’s just about waiting—first the asylum decision, then the appeal” (Detained man from Middle East, as cited in Könönen 2021: 722).

The “Waiting Game” is not a passive experience for migrants; it is a period marked by both severe hardships and active engagement. During the waiting period to cross the borders through “The List,” migrants faced intensified border violence due to hostile border control policies. They reported severe physical violence (e.g., bruises, swellings, broken arms, use of tear gas, beatings with batons, attacks by unmuzzled police dogs), verbal abuse (e.g., insults, swear words, blaring orders), intimidation and humiliation (e.g., being stripped naked, having their shoes and backpacks strips cut), deliberate deception and cultural insensitivity (e.g., pouring alcohol on their faces—particularly offensive given the prohibition of alcohol in Islamic religion/culture) (see e.g. BCHR 2017; Vještica 2018). These brutal acts exemplify the lived experience of physical, subtle, and structural violence by border authorities while migrants remained trapped in transit zones, detentions, camps, and informal settlements. Many migrants, while acknowledging their unlawful entry, pleaded for the cessation of the physical and psychological abuse endured: “We know we are breaking their law by entering their country without permission and they can return us if they catch us, but please make them stop beating and humiliating us.” Migrants also actively utilized the waiting time to save money, gather information, build networks, reorganize, and plan their next move (Jordan and Minca 2022). The “Waiting Game” is a relational concept where migrants actively engage in strategic interactions with authorities to negotiate their pending asylum decisions or terms of removal (Könönen 2021). It highlights the compulsion faced by migrants as they navigate borders and await administrative decisions, as well as their “social navigation” in building and strengthening social relations, while strategically preparing for the next step of the “game” (Bittel and Monsutti 2022: 461). The prolonged stay in transit countries like Serbia and Turkey, characterized by uncertainty and violence, forced many migrants to abandon legal migration paths in favor of riskier smuggling networks.

The (Im)Pure Solidarity Game

The intensification of “crimmigration” along the Balkan migration routes (Šalamon 2017) has given rise to complex social networks and temporary alliances that facilitate irregular migration. These informal networks, characterized by inherent power imbalances, highlight

the intricate interplay between solidarity and exploitation in the migration process. At the core of these networks lies a spectrum of actors, ranging from family and community ties to social intermediaries such as *hawala* brokers, community elders, and smugglers (Koser and Pinkerton 2002). *Hawala* brokers and community elders are often seen as trusted figures who facilitate essential services, including financial transactions and connections with smugglers. While these community members are typically held in high esteem, smugglers occupy a more ambiguous role, often perceived as a “necessary evil” (Mandić 2017: 28). As one migrant articulated, “For some, smugglers are angels because they are the only people who help to cross the border. But for others, they are a nightmare” (Basir, as cited in Augustová, 2021: 209). This duality highlights the complex and often conflicting perceptions of smugglers within migrant communities, where their role can be seen as both lifesaving and exploitative. In the context of unaccompanied minor irregular migration, the term “uncle” is commonly used as a discreet reference to a smuggler, a trusted community elder, or an extended family member who assists in facilitating or financing the child’s journey (Vještica and Dragojević 2021: 37). This usage is reflected in the testimony of an unaccompanied minor who explained: “He’s not really my uncle. We only call him ‘uncle’—he’s our neighbor” (A boy of 16, as cited in Jovanović et al. 2019). Smugglers often describe their “profession” as “an exciting and addictive game of outwitting border controls,” as articulated by a Pakistani smuggler with nearly 30 years of experience along the “Balkan Route”. The line between survival strategies and criminal activities within these networks is often blurred. While ground-level tasks may be seen as essential for survival, those in higher positions within smuggling networks frequently engage in violent crimes such as physical and sexual abuse, kidnapping, and conflicts between rival networks (Vještica 2018: 66; Vještica and Dragojević 2021: 23).

These networks, while providing crucial resources such as housing, employment, and healthcare, as well as navigation through hostile environments and restrictive borders, simultaneously perpetuate cycles of dependence and vulnerability through exploitative practices driven by profit motives. Exploiters wield significant power through their control of capital, information, logistics, and territorial knowledge. Smugglers capitalize on the loss of trust in authorities and the limited capacity of civil society actors to assist. Consequently, they exert significant influence over the decision-making processes of migrants, including those seeking resettlement or family reunification, who may opt to continue their journeys with smugglers due to their lack of trust in international agencies. Border violence enhances the bargaining power of smugglers, allowing them to impose higher fees and negotiate labor payments with economically and socially vulnerable migrants. Faced with the need to survive violent pushbacks and successfully cross borders, migrants often turn to smugglers despite the risks of exploitation. They tend to form alliances with “strangers” who possess similar migratory competencies, resourcefulness, and determination, rather than relying on kinship ties, as familial relationships can become complicated by sociocultural factors in the context of limited opportunities (Scalettaris et al. 2021: 529). The complexities of migrant experiences are often framed within a nuanced landscape of solidarity, challenging simplistic binaries of altruism versus exploitation, wherein care and violence, cooperation and competition coexist as two sides of the same coin (Augustová et al. 2023).

...the “Guarantee Game” and the “Walking Game”...

The strategies employed within these networks reflect a stark class stratification among migrants. Those with financial means can participate in the “Guarantee or VIP Game,”

which offers a relatively trouble-free border crossing on the first attempt, ensures migrants' payment, and allows repeated attempts without additional costs until the crossing is successful: As one Afghan man noted, "The money you pay to the smuggler covers as many attempts to enter Serbia as you want" (as cited in Morland 2023: 41). This "game" involves giving money to a *hawala* broker, who disburses payment to the smuggler after the migrant confirms safe arrival at the agreed destination. In contrast, direct payments to smugglers often result in migrants being cheated, abandoned before crossing, or asked for additional payments for subsequent attempts. The "Guarantee Game," wherein smugglers promise easy and successful border crossings on the first attempt, is exposed as a misnomer through the experiences and testimonies of migrants who encounter both brutal border enforcement and financial losses (Augustová 2021: 205–206).

The "Guarantee Game" often involves official bribes and vehicular transport for relatively safer and quicker passage. For instance, the "Chocolate Game"¹⁰ is the safest yet most expensive option, in which smugglers bribe border police by hiding money in chocolate wrappers, ensuring that their "clients in the taxi" do not face any issues during their journey. The simple "Taxi Game" typically involves a "good smuggler" who arranges for a car or taxi to pick up migrants after they cross a border on foot, drive them to the next border, where they will walk across again and be picked up on the other side (Minca and Collins 2021: 5). While less costly, it carries the constant risk of being caught, as it does not involve bribes to border police. Frequently, this "Game" results in taxi drivers not arriving, leading to the arrest of the group, or drivers abandoning their vehicles if pursued by police, leaving migrants stranded. It can also turn deadly if drivers attempt to flee from police, leading to dangerous accidents.

Conversely, those with limited financial means must resort to the more grueling and perilous "Walking Game," in which migrants form groups and try to cross the border together, relying on navigation tools and information, such as GPS and word-of-mouth guidance (Morland 2023: 41). During the "Walking Game," migrants face severe physical exhaustion and heightened vulnerability to border enforcement violence. They are exposed to harsh conditions, including bad weather, lack of food and shelter, and being chased by border patrols and dogs while crossing forests and rivers, climbing fences, jumping on trains, and hiding in trucks. A migrant recounts this experience: "We were running in the rain in the jungle [forest] for two days. I felt the police behind my back... We had no food... and they did [find us]" (Augustová 2021: 207).

The diverse strategies employed by migrants within "The Game" are epitomized by two distinct terms: "*geym-e garanti*" and "*khod andaz*," each representing a unique practical and cultural approach. "*Geym-e garanti*," derived from the English word "game," denotes a pre-arranged, smuggler-facilitated passage, often at significant financial cost but with the promise of successful border crossing (Vještica and Dragojević 2021: 37). In contrast, "*khod andaz*," meaning "self-launched" or "own style" in Farsi/Dari, conveys a self-organized "game" where the migrant undertakes the journey independently (Mucko et al. 2022). This latter term signifies not only the act of traveling alone but also embodies the cultural context of self-reliance and individual effort in navigating border crossings.

¹⁰ For an alternative perspective that explores the association between the term "chocolate" (here referring to the "Walking Game") and the fact that migrants often become very dirty and muddy during this process, see Augustová (2021: 207).

The Mind(s) Game

“The Game” has evolved into a complex, self-perpetuating cycle that arises from, and exacerbates, a range of interconnected socio-economic motivations and psychological pressures. Factors such as the desire for economic betterment, familial commitments, the pursuit of social status, the urge to overcome obstacles, and a gambler-like addiction to eventual success all contribute to a mindset that drives migrants to relentlessly attempt border crossings, despite significant risks and hardships.

Socio-cultural norms in sending countries imbue migration with notions of heroism, social prestige, and moral obligation. Migrants’ persistence in “The Game” is grounded in a spirit of desperate bravado. Their determination to successfully cross borders and survive pushbacks is often seen as a heroic act, with overcoming obstacles framed as a form of valor (Minca and Collins 2021: 2). The relentless pursuit of “The Game” transcends mere survival and the quest for a better future; it embodies a collective endeavor of pride and accomplishment, underpinned by mutual obligations, values, and responsibilities, shaped by a system of solidarity, norms, and social duties that collectively define the paradigm of “successful migrants” (Scalettari et al. 2021). High moral and socioeconomic pressures to succeed and improve their family’s fortunes compel migrants to embark on perilous journeys, often to repay debt or support their families who have invested in their journey (Vještica and Dragojević 2021: 24). Sending sons abroad for work is associated with familial and societal pride; successful migrants are celebrated as triumphant heroes, while those who fail may face community shaming, which affects the entire family. The stigma and shame of returning home empty-handed, equated with moral and social failure, drive many migrants to endure exploitative conditions abroad rather than face the disgrace within their communities (Schuster and Majidi 2015; Scalettari et al. 2021: 521). This sense of shame is especially poignant among returnees: “When Wali was deported, he could not go home. He was ashamed to face his family... The only worry is that people think that the ‘son of ...’ has returned and has money; I have none (Mohammad Gol, as cited in Schuster and Majidi 2015: 642–4). Many migrants prefer to stay and work irregularly, sending money home rather than return empty-handed.

The cultural dissonance between sending and receiving societies adds another layer of complexity to “The Game,” significantly impacting migrants’ perceptions and expectations. The perceived “cultural incompatibility” between receiving societies and migrants’ home countries (Jovanović 2018: 256) is particularly evident in contrasting attitudes towards undocumented migrants and the provision of assistance to travelers. In many migrants’ home cultures, hospitality and aiding travelers are fundamental cultural obligations that go beyond mere courtesy. For example, the Pashtunwali code (Edwards 1986) mandates that a Pashtun must offer shelter, food, and safety to any traveler in need, even risking their life to protect the guest. Additionally, living and working without regular documentation in many developing countries, while challenging, is socially accepted and not criminalized. Conversely, host societies in the Balkans often display intolerance towards undocumented migrants, with legal frameworks that criminalize assistance to irregular migrants (Šalamon 2017). This cultural dissonance is poignantly illustrated by the experiences of migrants along the “Balkan Route.” For instance, an unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan at the Sjenica Asylum Centre in Serbia questioned, “Why can’t you drive me to the border? If you were in my country and you wanted to go somewhere, I would take you there.” Similarly, Pashtun migrants, when denied basic assistance such as food, shelter, and clothes at the Miksalište hub in Belgrade, expressed bewilderment: “What sort of people are these? They

don't know how to treat a traveler properly. We don't do this in our country." These narratives reflect deeply ingrained cultural norms and expectations of hospitality in many South-east Asian and Middle Eastern countries, which clash sharply with the legal restrictions and hostile reception encountered along the "Balkan Route." This dissonance contributes significantly to migrants' feelings of disenfranchisement and alienation in host societies.

... and the "Repeated Game(s)"

The socio-psychological circumstances experienced by migrants, coupled with stringent border control measures and resilient smuggling networks, have fostered a persistent and cyclical dynamic of a "Variegated Game" of border crossing along the Balkan Route. This often necessitates migrants to make multiple attempts or try different "Games," entrapping them in continuous border crossing endeavors (Zocchi 2023: 2; BVMN n.d.). The persistence and repetitiveness of "The Game" can lead to a substantial erosion of migration autonomy and agency, resulting in severe psychological consequences.

The gamification of border crossing has influenced both the practical aspects of migration and the cognitive frameworks through which migrants understand, navigate, and feel about "The Game." Migrants often draw explicit parallels between their border-crossing experiences and video games, likening the process to an iterative cycle of failure and persistence until success is achieved: "You know, this [border crossing] is like the 'game' because it is risky. It is like a video game. You fail and start playing again, fail and again, fail and again until you win" (Ali, as cited in Augustová 2021: 203). Migrants navigate their quests with a gamer-like mindset, deliberately mimicking their migration "Game" experiences and routines while referring to or playing video games: "We play Mobile Legends together, so we can be in the same team... I really like this game because it needs a lot of strategy, and you dive into another world... You know, Mobile Legends sometimes makes me more nervous, as there is a lot of strategy. You want to keep playing in order to reach a superior level, and to get to know the game better, all its possibilities" (Ali Reza, as cited in Bittel and Monsutti 2022: 466). This analogy with video games, exemplified by "Mobile Legends," captures the strategic depth and crucial role of collective dynamics ("be in the same team") required to outmaneuver opponents, as well as the psychological immersion of "diving into another world" of harsh realities. It further reflects the desire and determination to "better understand the game's mechanics" and "keep playing to reach higher levels," as well as the emotional complexity characterized by both "enjoyment" and "stress" or "anxiety" when navigating the strategic intricacies of "The Game." In a broader sense, gamification of border crossing as a survival strategy in a world devoid of solidarity is embodied in a dystopian social vision, akin to narratives such as "The Hunger Games," "Battle Royale," and "Squid Game,"¹¹ which illustrate how extreme social inequalities push individuals into complex moral dilemmas, forcing them to choose between collective cooperation and ruthless competition to survive and succeed.

While this gamified framework promotes resilience, strategic thinking, and creativity, it also risks being a seductive euphemism that trivializes the life-threatening dangers faced

¹¹ In the popular series *Squid Game*, financially desperate individuals participate in deadly games for a cash prize, finding it difficult to opt out due to their dire situations. Similarly, *Battle Royale* portrays disillusioned students in a collapsed economy who are forced into a deadly game, illustrating how extreme social inequalities drive individuals to choose between showing solidarity with others or competing ruthlessly to survive and win the game by any means.

by migrants (Mucko et al. 2022). The gamification of border crossing, influenced by digital gaming culture, and popular media, may inadvertently encourage migrants to adopt a perilous “do-or-die” mindset (Zocchi 2023: 15), wherein “The Game” becomes a repetitive cycle of trial and error, reminiscent of video game mechanics, driven by a gambler-like mentality. This sentiment is encapsulated in the words of one migrant: “I have nothing to lose, I want to gamble with my life” (a young man from Kandahar, as cited in Scalettaris et al. 2021: 528). The cumulative impact of continuous criminalization and dehumanization experienced by migrants along the Balkan Route, coupled with prolonged exposure to conflict and traumatic experiences, significantly alters their perception of violence and acceptance of suffering at borders. For many migrants, “the prospect of getting beaten is not as scary as going back home and risk getting killed” (Zahid’s experience, as cited in BCHR 2017: 6). This “normalization” of physical violence and denial of access to international protection mechanisms often leads to serious psychological disorders, including depression, anger, substance abuse, self-harm, and even suicide attempts (Arsenijević et al 2017: 92; Jovanović et al. 2019; Gluhovic 2023: 608). Migrants, including unaccompanied minors traveling alone along the Balkan Route, have become accustomed to the risks of “The Game” and often accept danger and exploitation (Magee 2024). They hope to eventually regularize their status in a country where they can build a life and obtain personal documents that will allow them to live, work, and travel freely. This sentiment is poignantly captured by one migrant’s words: “We don’t need money, we don’t need this [pointing at a bag with groceries...]. We need to go, start to work, live” (a 58-year-old male from Iraq, as cited in Rydzewski 2024: 82). In this pursuit, they continue to navigate the “Variegated Game,” often without achieving their goal.

Concluding Remarks and Open Avenues

“All these migrants you see here. They are either returning from a game, preparing for a game, or waiting to go game. All of us think about the game. It is the only thing that matters.” (Tariq, 19 years old, Pakistan, as cited in Zocchi 2023: 14)

Ongoing irregular mobility across the Balkans has introduced new vocabularies and players, adding a fresh dimension to the region’s enduring migratory routes, that are marked by heightened political contestation and increasingly lethal consequences. This article has explored the complex dynamics of irregular migration along the “Balkan Route” through the metaphor of “The Game,” revealing a multifaceted landscape of experiences, strategies, and challenges. By adopting an interdisciplinary and multi-level approach (Castles 2003) and building upon existing conceptualizations of “The Game” (Minca and Collins 2021; Altin 2021; Zocchi 2023), our study elucidates the intricate interplay between structural factors, social networks, and individual experiences that shape contemporary migration patterns and decisions. We have highlighted how various game metaphors reflect the different strategies, challenges, and psychological impacts of the migration experience.

Our findings reveal a paradoxical outcome of current migration policies: measures aimed at deterrence often inadvertently increase migrants’ vulnerability and reliance on exploitative networks. This dynamic underscores the need for a critical reassessment of current approaches to migration governance. Furthermore, our analysis highlights the dual role of social networks in migration processes, serving as both sources of solidarity and mechanisms of domination and exploitation. The psychological impact of repeated border crossing attempts emerges as a crucial aspect of “The Game.” Our study shows how

the gamification of migration can simultaneously empower and endanger migrants, raising important questions about the ethical implications of current migration practices and their long-term effects on migrants' well-being. These findings contribute to ongoing debates in critical migration studies about agency, resilience, and the human cost of border regimes.

However, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this study. While our focus on the "Balkan Route" provides valuable insights, it may limit the generalizability of our findings to other migration contexts. Additionally, both the existing literature and our fieldwork reflect a gender and ethnic bias, predominantly capturing the experiences of male migrants from specific ethnic groups. Single men, particularly from specific ethnic backgrounds, often lead border-crossing attempts, while families with women and children, though not exempt from violence and expulsion, generally face fewer pushbacks (Vještica 2018: 20). Single men are often stereotyped as "criminals" while women are viewed as "victims," a narrative that undermines women's agency and fails to acknowledge their decision-making abilities (Ivnik 2017). Moreover, even smugglers tend to be male, with few women involved (Morland 2023: 42). Ethnicity also plays a role in "The Game," with migrants from African countries, such as Moroccans and Algerians, reportedly facing greater risks as they often engage in the "Walking Game" (Morland 2023:42). This bias highlights the need for more inclusive and intersectional approaches in future migration research.

Moving forward, we propose several avenues for future research. First, adopting an intersectional approach that considers gender, ethnicity, and historical continuities could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse experiences within "The Game." Second, comparative studies across different migration routes could offer valuable insights into the global dynamics of irregular migration. Third, exploring the effectiveness of alternative migration policies that prioritize human rights and dignity is crucial for informing more ethical and effective approaches to migration governance. Furthermore, longitudinal studies examining the long-term psychological impacts of prolonged engagement in "The Game" are needed to fully understand the consequences of these migration patterns. Finally, future research should delve deeper into the dynamics between various actors involved in the migration process, including migrants, smugglers, state authorities, and humanitarian organizations.

In conclusion, our study of the "Variegated Game" along the "Balkan Route" not only captures the complexities of irregular border crossing but also contributes to broader theoretical debates about autonomy and control, solidarity and exploitation, and risk and reward in migration contexts. By bridging conceptual richness with on-the-ground realities, this research provides a foundation for more nuanced, ethical, and effective approaches to understanding and addressing the challenges of contemporary irregular migration.

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