

**RESPOND**

## **Working Papers**

### **Global Migration: Consequences and Responses**

Paper 2020/62, August 2020

## **Border Experiences and Practices of Refugees**

### **Comparative Report**

**Sabine Hess (Göttingen University)**

**Vasileios Petrogiannis (Uppsala University)**

© Göttingen University & Uppsala University

Reference: RESPOND [D2.5]

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4008612

This research was conducted under the Horizon 2020 project 'RESPOND Multilevel Governance of Migration and Beyond' (770564).

The sole responsibility of this publication lies with the author. The European Union is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at: [shess@uni-goettingen.de](mailto:shess@uni-goettingen.de)

This document is available for download at [www.respondmigration.com](http://www.respondmigration.com)

---

RESPOND: Multilevel  
Governance of Migration in  
Europe and Beyond (770564)



Co-funded by the Horizon 2020 programme  
of the European Union

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .....	4
About the project .....	5
Executive summary .....	6
<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2. Border experiences – general characteristics.....</b>	<b>12</b>
2.1. Space and time matters .....	12
2.2. Viapolitical dimensions .....	14
2.3. Supportive infrastructures – collective care .....	18
2.4. Gender matters.....	19
2.5. Border violence, unsafety, and risk—the border as violent situation .....	20
2.6. Interim conclusion.....	21
<b>3. The Balkan route in contrast to the Central Mediterranean route .....</b>	<b>22</b>
3.1. The humanitarian corridor through the Balkans of 2015 as an exception.....	22
3.2. The formalized corridor as a form of detention .....	25
3.3. Walking as a central characteristic of the Balkan route .....	26
3.4. Unsafe flight route – unsafe places.....	27
3.5. The Central Mediterranean route – “the death route” .....	33
<b>4. Border violence.....</b>	<b>38</b>
4.1. Direct, interpersonal violence.....	38
4.1.1. Violence by authorities .....	38
4.1.2. Violence by civilians: Smugglers, locals, gangs.....	41
4.1.3. Nonhuman sources of violence: Border technologies, nature .....	42
4.2. Pushbacks and detention .....	43
4.3. Internal controls, legal insecurity, deportability .....	46
<b>5. Knowledge, Information, Planning.....</b>	<b>48</b>
5.1. Planned and unplanned journeys, and the choice of destination.....	48
5.1.1. Unplanned.....	49
5.1.2. With a plan .....	50
5.2. The choice of destination .....	50
5.3. Step-by-step: Fragmented and interrupted journeys .....	53
5.4. Sources of information .....	54
5.4.1. Role of personal and diasporic networks .....	54
5.4.2. Smugglers as a source of knowledge and (mis)information .....	56
5.4.3. Social media and the Internet as a source of information .....	57
<b>6. Border Economies .....</b>	<b>59</b>
6.1. Logistical infrastructures of migration (control) .....	59
6.2. Smuggling economies .....	60
6.3. (Un)free labor exploitation – debt bondage .....	62
<b>7. Gendered experiences – gendered migration-control regimes .....</b>	<b>63</b>
7.1. Migration control as body politics.....	63
7.2. Gender-based violence .....	64
7.3. The male body in migration control.....	66
<b>8. (Forced) mobilities – the Dublin Regulation .....</b>	<b>69</b>
<i>Appendix: List of Interviews .....</i>	<i>72</i>
<i>Bibliography.....</i>	<i>77</i>

## Acknowledgements

We would like to express our great appreciation to our colleagues of the other national RESPOND teams – Glasgow Caledonian University, University of Cambridge, Istanbul Bilgi University, Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, University of Florence, Özyegin University, University of The Aegean, Austrian Academy of Sciences, University of Warsaw, Lebanon Support, Hammurabi Human Rights Organization - who together generated the rich material basis of this report, to James Powell for the careful English-language proofreading, and to Eva Apelt for her tireless efforts as student assistant.

## About the project

“RESPOND: Multilevel Governance of Mass Migration in Europe and Beyond” is a comprehensive study of responses to the 2015 refugee crisis. Among the most visible impacts of the latter have been the polarization of politics in EU member states and intra-member state policy incoherence in responding to it. Incoherence stems from diverse constitutional structures, legal provisions, economic conditions, public policies, as well as cultural norms, and more research is consequently needed to determine how to mitigate conflicting needs and objectives. With the goal of enhancing the governance capacity and policy coherence of the European Union, its member states, and of its neighbors, RESPOND brings together fourteen partners from eleven countries and a number of different academic disciplines. In particular, the project aims to: provide an in-depth understanding of the governance of recent mass migration at the macro, meso, and micro levels through cross-country comparative research; and, to critically analyze governance practices with the aim of enhancing the migration-governance capacity and policy coherence of the EU, its member states, and of third countries.

The countries selected for the study are Austria, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iraq, Italy, Lebanon, Poland, Sweden, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. By focusing on these countries, RESPOND is able to study migration governance across five thematic fields: (1) border management and security; (2) refugee-protection regimes; (3) reception policies; (4) integration policies; and, (5) so-called conflicting Europeanization. These fields literally represent refugees’ journeys across borders, from their confrontations with protection policies, to their travels through reception centers, and in some cases, ending with their integration into new societies.

To explore all of these dimensions, RESPOND employs a truly interdisciplinary approach using legal, political, comparative-historical, political-claims, socioeconomic, cultural, longitudinal-survey, and interview-based analysis, as well as photovoice techniques (some of these methods are implemented later in the project). The investigation is innovatively designed as multilevel research on migration governance as it now operates beyond macro-level actors, such as nation-states or the EU. Migration management engages meso- and micro-level actors as well. Local governments, NGOs, civil associations, and refugees themselves are not merely the passive recipients of policies but shape them from the ground up. The project also focuses on learning from refugees. RESPOND defines a new subject position for refugees, as people who have been forced to find creative solutions to life-threatening situations and thus as ones who can generate new forms of knowledge and information as a result.

## Executive summary

This report analyzes how refugees are impacted by border-management policies and migration controls, and how they experience these policies and respond to them. It is based on 507 interviews with refugee migrants who made their way to Lebanon, Turkey, as well as a number of European countries between 2013 and 2018, being conducted by the eleven national Respond Teams. The empirical data not only allows us to reconstruct the effects of the existing border regimes on the lives of those who are their main object and target; we also outline how this analytical perspective on the practices and experiences of refugee migrants also enriches our understanding of what a “border” is today, and how it has been practiced by the respective nation-states in recent years. The interview material especially allows us to reconstruct the events of the years 2015 and 2016, which have been commonly referred to in the public discourse and by politicians and academia alike as the “European refugee crisis.” Thereby we will show that for most of the refugee migrants who made their journeys in these very months of 2015 and 2016 it was anything but a crisis, notwithstanding all the fears and hardships they were still regularly confronted with. Rather, the analyses—based on the comparison of experiences on the Balkan route with those on the Central Mediterranean one—clearly demonstrate that life-threatening risks and human rights violations directly correlate with border-control policies that aim to control the movements of migration and flight by sealing off the border. Hereby the report vividly illustrates that the very nature of border- and migration-control policies within the EU—especially regarding its external dimensions—has spatial effects reaching far beyond just the concrete “borderline” determining especially the way the “journey” can be practiced (legally/illegally; documented/undocumented), the topographical and practical nature of the routes, the possible means of transportation, and the necessary/available logistical infrastructures.

As migrants’ voices are mostly left out in public considerations as well as in most academic writing and theoretization, especially in border studies that still treat “the border” as more or less a top-down, technopolitical object of inquiry, we decided to integrate as many direct quotes and descriptions as possible here. The report thus strives to be a “thick” documentation of migrants’ experiences with the border- and migration-control regimes in the last few years. This fifth report within the scope of Work Package II of the RESPOND research project consequently rounds off our multilevel analyses on border- and migration-control policies of the EU, of its member states, as well as of Iraq, Lebanon, and Turkey between 2011 and 2018.

# 1. Introduction

This report looks at how refugees are impacted by border-management policies and migration controls, and how they experience these policies and respond to them. It is the fifth report of Work Package II (WP2) on border- and migration-control policies within the Horizon 2020 research project “RESPOND: Multilevel Governance of Mass Migration in Europe and Beyond.” In contrast to the other four reports that deal with the emergence of the policy field as a harmonized and supranational one within the EU (see Karamanidou and Kasperek 2018), with the performance and shortcomings of one of its main agencies, FRONTEX (Karamanidou and Kasperek 2020), analyze national-border-control policies and their implementation in the respective eleven RESPOND countries between 2011 and 2018, as well as compare these national responses to global flight-migration, this one solely focuses on the subjective experiences of refugee migrants who made their way to Lebanon, Turkey, and a number of European countries between 2013 and 2018. This report is interested in the views, interpretations, and interactions of refugee migrants themselves with the different border situations they were confronted with on their journeys. As we do not want to reproduce in our scientific analyses the main political categorizations of cross-border mobilities into mainly “labor migration” on the one hand and on the other “refugees” and “asylum seekers” deserving international protection we use the terms “asylum-seeking migrants” or “refugee migration/migrant” to hint at the multiple impulses, motivation and migration biographies underlying why people seek refuge and protection.

The empirical data not only allows us to reconstruct the effects of the existing border regimes on the lives of those who are their main object and target, rather we will outline how this analytical perspective on the practices and experiences of refugee-migrants also enriches our understanding what a “border” is today and how it is functioning in recent years. Concretely, the 507 interviews that the different RESPOND teams conducted in 2018 and 2019 with refugee migrants of various countries of origin<sup>1</sup> and statuses are a rich resource to help reconstruct the events of the years 2015 and 2016 that have been commonly referred to in the public discourse and by politicians and academia alike as the “European refugee crisis.” Thereby we will show that for most of the refugee migrants who made their journeys in these very months of 2015 and 2016 it was anything but a crisis, notwithstanding all the fears and hardships that they were confronted with. Rather, the analyses clearly demonstrate that life-threatening risks and human rights violations directly correlate with border-control policies that aim to stem movements of migration and flight by sealing off the border. Hereby the report vividly illuminates how the very nature of border- and migration-control policies within the EU—especially regarding its external dimensions (Lahav and Guiraudon 2000; Lavenex 2004)—has spatial effects reaching far beyond just the concrete “borderline” determining especially the way the “journey” can be practiced (legally/illegally; documented/undocumented), the topographical and practical nature of the routes, the possible means of transportation, and the necessary/available logistical infrastructures.

<sup>1</sup> The main countries of origin of our interlocutors were: Syria (57 percent), Iraq (11 percent), and Afghanistan (9 percent). Adding to these figures were other countries (23 percent), out of a total 507 interviewees. Herein the following gender balance exists: 291 male respondents (57 percent), 211 female respondents (42 percent), 5 other genders (1 percent).

In principle, we follow the understanding of border and migration control outlined by the recent border studies literature that conceptualizes the border as an “apparatus” or a “regime” (Walters 2002; Hess and Kasperek 2019) constituting a deterritorialized borderscape—one enacted and performed at different sites and by various actors, leading to an “ubiquity of borders” as Étienne Balibar once coined it (Balibar 2002, 84). Within the scope of WP2 we operationalize this conceptualization by shedding light on four specific dimensions: external-control practices; at the border; internal-control regime; and, return policies. However, analyzing the interview material and the narratives that our interlocutors expressed brings forward additional and different situated notions of how and where border and migration control were enacted—and, ultimately, of how and what “the border” has looked like in different regions and in specific time periods, pointing to a certain flexibility of border enactment. This fifth report within the scope of the RESPOND research project consequently rounds off our multilevel analyses on border- and migration-control policies of the EU, of its member states, as well as of Iraq, Lebanon, and Turkey between 2011 and 2018.

The analyses of the experiences of refugee migrants with the different national and regional border and migration regimes is based on interview materials from ten RESPOND countries (Austria, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lebanon, Poland, Sweden, Turkey, and the UK), coded by the respective national teams in line with a common scheme for that. We as the authors of this report were supplied by the ten RESPOND teams with border- and journey-related coded interview extracts differing in length and thickness quite significantly between the respective country teams. Most of the extracts were translated into English, some were forwarded in the native language of the national team, and others arrived in those used by respective interlocutors, producing additional differences concerning the availability of first-hand refugee-migrant narrations.

Most interviews were held in the interviewee’s mother tongue or in a language that the interviewee preferred to speak, as we provided trained interviewers fluent in the different regional languages. All interviewers explained the academic context of the interviews, and asked for the consent of the participants in oral and written form. Due to the specific setting of such interviews, with refugees as a vulnerable group, the interviewers were counseled in trauma-sensitive interview approaches and trained to pay heed to their own psychological and physical wellbeing. Nevertheless, not only were many interviewers deeply shocked and physically moved by the stories that they listened to, also some student assistants who transcribed the interviews had the same experience too. All interviews were held with the same questionnaire that was consensually elaborated and agreed on by the European RESPOND consortium members; nevertheless, the interviewers were inspired to handle the questionnaire flexibly and to adjust it to individual and regional circumstances. In addition, the code list was jointly elaborated by the RESPOND consortium and individually flexibly handled using MAXQDA, N-Vivo or another coding software.

The material was gathered through in-situ interviews with 30-60 migrants per country following also a commonly agreed sampling scheme that allowed for national adaptations in line with the overall composition of the refugee population in a given country (in view of gender and national origins). The authors of the report examined the coded material and identified common narratives and themes in relation to refugee migrants’ journeys and their interactions and experiences with the different border-control practices, infrastructures, and technologies they were confronted with along the way. By analyzing and paying attention to the subjective accounts of persons who had to mostly cross multiple borders in order to reach a country they were residing in at the moment of the interview we did not follow a strict representative



approach, rather an exemplary one taking each biography and experience as singular and worth telling. As migrants' voices are largely left out in public discussions as well as in most academic writing and theoretization, especially in border studies that still treats the "border" as more or less a top-down, technopolitical object of inquiry, we decided to integrate as many direct quotes and descriptions as possible here. In this way, the report attempts to be a "thick" documentation of migrants' experiences with the border- and migration-control regimes in the last few years.

Additionally, the rich empirical material not only allows us to compare different routes and times—and hence facilitates deeper understanding of the effects of different border- and migration-control regimes on the movements and lives of people who do not belong to the upper 10 percent of the global mobility hierarchy that in normal times can easily and freely travel wherever they want. These first-hand accounts can, furthermore, also teach us more about where and what the border is / looks like in the context of the "biopolitical border" (Walters 2002) that is increasingly used as a central terrain and technology in migration control. The findings reveal that the nature of the border- and migration-control policies themselves, how they are enacted by the different countries, and how they are influenced by the EU act all as decisive factors in the refugee-migrants' overall journey and border experience.

Hereby the question of the porosity of the border, namely the legal construction of the crossing (which starts with the visa regime), as well as of the concrete border-control practices employed defines the whole migration experience, and especially the conditions under which the journey takes place. The physical hazards encountered by people fleeing and that they are increasingly directed toward and dependent on ever more dangerous (longer) routes—in terms of topographical conditions, the means of transportation, and the need to utilize smuggling services—are directly connected to border- and migration-control policies and practices that try to seal off borders against these groups of people on the move. They are conceptualized and labeled as "illegal" or "irregular" migrants, even if they are obviously fleeing situations of war—as persons from Syria or Afghanistan are for example (the countries of origin of 66 percent of our respondents).

The report also reveals that these border policies—and specifically how they are enacted through both human and nonhuman practices and devices such as fences, dogs, speedboats, sticks, weapons, camps, detention, and the like—deliberately take into account and produce different forms of physical and psychological violence that are highly gendered, ultimately leading in certain instances to the death of migrants. The report not only outlines the systematic usage of different forms of interpersonal violence especially in the context of direct border-control practices that challenge international-protection regimes such as the European Convention for the Prevention of Torture or the non-refoulement principle (as one of the cornerstones of the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention). It also sheds light on a different, more structural, and less clear aspect of border violence that we define as the "active withholding of care and protection" (e.g. medical treatment in police custody; sea rescue), also against the violence perpetrated by third persons (from robbery to labor and sexualized exploitation). In this respect the experiences of refugee migrants who made their journey via the so-called Balkan route and especially via the "humanitarian" or "formalized" corridor in the autumn and winter months of 2015–2016 are significantly different as compared to those of respondents who made their way via the Central Mediterranean route. This comparison shows how time and place matters.

Additionally, the interview material demonstrates again how social capital (financial as well as educational and sociocultural—the latter for the most part taking the form of networks that are always gendered) frames migration experiences and conditions different opportunity structures. In this respect, money and a valid travel document are the two most important currencies—that are mediated by the existence of networks. Thereby our material again shows how the relevant border-control policies have gendered effects and expose especially women and children to specific hardships as well as gender-based and sexualized forms of violence like rape and “transactional sex.” Even taking into account the literature on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and the difficulty that some of our interlocutors themselves expressed to remember and narrate such experiences,<sup>2</sup> 5 percent nevertheless clearly stated they had been raped and/or trafficked. Conversely, however, the narratives also shed light on how along the routes communities of care are being built, and support initiated. The report also shows that the humanitarian corridor along the Balkan route in 2015–2016 made a difference with regard to the gender composition of those on the move, with more single parents and their children as well as ill and handicapped persons making the journey.

As the report is interested in the subjective experiences and in the practices of respondents in dealing with the given border regime, light is also shed on the wisdom, knowledge, and agency of flight-migration. We are able to show how along the main routes and within the key regions, countries, and communities that most refugee migrants have originated from in recent years there is a lot of information and know-how circulating (with social media being only one resource among many more classical ones, especially personal networks) on how to do it and where to go, even if not every rumor is correct. Additionally, the histories of flight and immigration have produced sometimes well-established diaspora networks or transnational ethnic or religious affiliations and infrastructures; many of our respondents had relatives or friends in Europe who were not only an incentive also to try, as chain-migration theory argues, but who also in many cases assisted the flight and made it possible by building important bridges to the countries that our respondents wanted to reach. The material also points to the fact that—especially in reaction to the mass refugee-migration movements in 2015 and in light of the official responses thereto—diverse other civil society actors, individuals, and organized groups would also join in these transnational “assemblages of assistance and solidarity” (Brecnec and Kurnik 2020).

Further, our obtained primary material also helps to reconstruct how the relevant border- and migration-control policies have created a certain border economy, one made up of diverse state and private actors, and legal, half-legal, irregular, and criminalized economic activities that on the one hand help to enact the border-control apparatus and on the other enable migration to take place—with some actors involved in and exploiting both sides of the coin. As the border-control regime irregularizes and criminalizes flight-migration, a logistical infrastructure has emerged that reacts to the demand to assist and facilitate mobility.

<sup>2</sup> Based on the recent literature on research ethics and methods that points to the necessity of developing a specific research sensitivity in the interaction with possibly traumatized interlocutors and their narratives, RESPOND organized training for its interviewers and team members. Experience shows however that also the researchers who translate, transcribe, code, and analyze primary material should be included in such trauma-sensitivity and resilience training as they are confronted with narrations of rape and other forms of violence that can be challenging descriptions to process.

However, the material also shows that some respondents did not have any time to plan their flight or just envisioned it as temporary, and so went to a neighboring country only to find out after a while that also there conditions do not offer a safe future – and thus they found themselves again looking for a better place to stay. In fact, many respondents reported long flight biographies, with different stops that could last from a few months to several years. Such “fragmented” (Collyer 2010) or protracted journeys call into question the clear-cut conceptualization of certain countries as “transit” or “destination” ones (see also, Hess 2010). The narratives thus offer forth a plethora of reasons for why these individuals sometimes decided to stay or to keep going – due to economic reasons, educational possibilities, gender norms, legal safety, protection against discrimination, healthy and medical system, friends, some not in their own hands (Dublin Regulation, political upheavals).

All in all, the report is a rich documentation of the border- and migration-control experiences of refugee migrants especially in the years between 2013 and 2016 as most of our interlocutors arrived in the respective countries where they have been interviewed in this period. It sheds light on the changes in border- and migration-control policies and practices in this period, with a focus primarily on the Balkan route and to a lesser extent on the Central Mediterranean one. As most interviews took place in early 2018, the empirical material does not cover more recent developments after the official closure of the Balkan route and the EU-Turkey deal of March 2016. Nevertheless, if we apply the wider notion of “safety” as laid down in the first articles (3–6) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights then we have to ascertain that most routes being taken up to 2016 were unsafe, as they exposed fleeing migrants to a number of acute risks and uncertainties—most with life-threatening consequences.

## 2. Border experiences – general characteristics

“Fleeing isn’t always right, but it’s always at the top of the options.” (Interview 169-UK)

We already know from the literature that borders are experienced differently. Or to put it another way: borders are not the same, and differ with regard to each moment in time and space as well as concerning the person (gender, age, nationality, resources such as money, information, and networks) crossing them (Balibar 2002). Nevertheless, in the following section we will outline some general denominators and criteria that determined the flight experiences of the refugee migrants the RESPOND teams were able to talk with. We will present an overview of the routes mostly taken by our interlocutors, who made their journeys predominantly between 2013 and 2016, and outline the organizational and structural characteristics of these flight-migration trajectories toward Europe. These individuals had to cross a multilayered border regime spanning different nation-state borders, albeit one that is partly harmonized under EU policy regulations—as described by Kasperek and Karaminidou in their report on “Border Management and Migration Control in the European Union” (2018).

### 2.1. Space and time matters

Against the background of the interview material that the report is based on, we can most clearly divide experiences according to the routes being taken<sup>3</sup>: namely between on the one hand the so-called *Eastern Mediterranean and Balkan route* (we will refer to it as *Balkan route*) transiting **Turkey**, **Greece** (or, for a few, via Bulgaria, Albania, or Montenegro), through the Balkans region, via **Hungary** or Croatia and Slovenia, to **Austria**, and further on to **Germany**, Denmark, **Sweden**, or to **Italy** and the **UK** (RESPOND countries in bold) and on the other the *Central Mediterranean route*. Hereby we have only little information of the inner-African routes that refugee migrants take. Most interviewees crossed the Mediterranean via Libya; only some started their journey from Egypt, Tunisia, or Morocco. Most landed in or were rescued and then taken to Italy; only a handful told the RESPOND teams that they had landed in Spain having crossed the sea via the *Western Mediterranean route* and reached, via France, one of the northern European member states.<sup>4</sup> We can reconstruct from the interview material of the UK team a route to that country either by land and sea, via France/Belgium, or by air. Another, numbers-wise minor, pathway is the so-called *Northern route*, stretching from Russia to Poland and further west that can be reconstructed from the interview material of the Polish country team. This route can be hardly found in the interview material of the Austrian, German, or Swedish teams: only one interviewed person originating from Syria came via Lithuania to Germany, and one via Georgia and Kiev to Austria.<sup>5</sup> In the following sections we not only

<sup>3</sup> There are also a few people who came to Europe via creative, unfamiliar ways: one Syrian refugee migrant tried to cross from Turkey to Greece by sea twelve times but failed, and then came to Sweden via Malaysia and France in 2013 with a fake passport instead (Interview 120-SWE); another Syrian went first to Sudan and stayed there for some years before eventually getting to Turkey (Interview 103-TUR).

<sup>4</sup> From Syria to Sweden via Morocco and Spain (Interview 122-SWE).

<sup>5</sup> Among our 507 respondents one has as a country of origin Russia, twelve Chechnya, and three Ukraine. Additionally, there are some interviews with migrants from Latin America; we exclude these experiences from the report, however, as number-wise they are so rare.

outline how the experiences with these respective routes differ but also which factors structure the decision—or rather the possibility—to take a certain one.

The experiences of the interviewed migrants thus complicate the clear-cut conceptualizations of countries as sending, receiving, and transit ones, as dominant in the public discourse. Transit countries such as Turkey are increasingly turning into ones of arrival and more permanent stay while classical receiving countries such as Germany serve as transit spaces and are turning into places of temporary residence—accompanied by changing needs of migrants. The composition of the RESPOND consortium encompassing northern European countries like Denmark and Sweden makes it possible to show that the Balkan route did not come to an end in Germany as is often imagined, probably due to the latter's visible role in September 2015 when Chancellor Angela Merkel kept the country's borders open—and with this decision helped to construct the humanitarian corridor that passed through Hungary in the autumn months of the same year. Rather, especially during the peak days of the mass refugee movements in the second half of 2015 and beginning of 2016, Austria<sup>6</sup> and more so Germany also served as transit countries for a route heading further north, passing through Denmark to Sweden. As one woman recalled:

*When we got to Greece, the borders were all open. Thousands of Arabs and Afghans were with us when we were crossing the border of Greece. In seven days, I got to Sweden from Greece by bus and train. When we got to Germany, the police took us, they stopped the bus, they asked me for my passport, and told me I don't have a visa and asked how I got into Germany without one. But then I told him that everyone has come without one, not just me or my family. Every day, thousands of people go to Germany. (Interview 138-SWE)*

Some respondents were smuggled the whole way through Europe as far as Sweden, as this migrant who arrived in Italy and contacted some smugglers there reported: “We paid 1,000 euros per person to Sweden. It was buses, and these people were smugglers. One from the Netherlands, and the other one I don't remember” (Interview 126-SWE). Some directly crossed Austria and Germany, with the goal of reaching Sweden; others stayed in Austria or Germany for a period of time, got registered, and eventually traveled onward further north.<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, the flight biographies show as well that the classical linear and unidirectional conceptualization of flight as a south-north movement has to be rethought. Due to the Dublin Regulation, other national dynamics, as well as for personal reasons, crisscross movements through Europe in search of a socially and legally safer place to stay can be identified. We can also observe an increasing north-south mobility that can only partly be conceptualized as freely occurring, as we will show later in respect of Dublin returns.

Another decisive factor for different experiences of the journey and of the borders being crossed was time: Even if RESPOND was interested in experiences from 2011 up to 2018, most refugee migrants interviewed arrived in the respective countries between 2013 and 2016. Nevertheless, many had started their migration and flight years before (the earliest in the year

<sup>6</sup> Some respondents recalled that they were told by Austrian police to move on (Interview 56-GER).

<sup>7</sup> One respondent to the Swedish RESPOND team recalled: “Then we booked a train ticket to Germany, I was going to Germany in order to surrender myself there, I had all my papers translated into German, then suddenly I found out that there are tents, I asked what are the tents for, they said that the groups that arrived to surrender themselves will sleep in those tents. Therefore, I canceled the idea of surrendering in Germany, as you want to be settled not to live in a tent! Therefore, I continued to Sweden, and arrived here in Malmö” (Interview 128-SWE).

2000).<sup>8</sup> The experiences of interviewees who made their journey in 2015 and at the beginning of 2016, and most clearly those who in that time period went through the humanitarian or formalized corridor of the Balkan route, are very specific and exceptional ones—something that we will outline in more detail in the next main section.

## 2.2. Viapolitical dimensions

Following William Walters viapolitical research agenda (2015) drawing attention to “the vehicle, its road, its route” as a central site of “migration controversies” (ibid., 470), we describe in more detail not only the means of transportation taken and how this structured the experience of the journey and the border crossing but also shed light on the different factors heavily determining the choices possible. Some interviewees voiced a clear understanding that the clandestine and difficult pathway most had to take was a result of government decisions and an effect of restrictive immigration policies. As this Syrian refugee expressed:

*I think the organization to come here was bad from the beginning. The German government could do it another way. All the money we paid could have been paid to the government to get a proper visa and come here by airplane. The government would benefit from the money and people could be saved from the drowning. Why should I pay 5,000 euros for a smuggler? (Interview 157-GER)*

The interviews identified a broad variety of transportation means being used, many well known in the literature and public debate—such as boat, foot, train, bus, car, taxi, plane, and lorry. Others more unfamiliar like bicycle, camper van, or horse and cow (by persons crossing the Iranian-Turkish border) were also mentioned. Thereby the route and the means of transportation not only depended on the resources at hand like money, information, or networks but also on the way the crossing is legally constructed and the border controlled—and hence how the latter could be crossed at specific points in time.

In this respect the routes being taken and the quality of the services and comfort that could be acquired financially are an expression of global as well as national social hierarchies and class positions, as expressed by these two migrants:

*I knew that I have to go by the rubber boat from Turkey because I do not have money to go by airplane or ship. So, I went to Turkey and I stayed eight days there. (Interview 121-SWE)<sup>9</sup>*

*I was rich. I didn't want to waste time asking for help, I had money with me. I went to a hotel in Greece, the best hotel, where I stayed for two to three days to relax. Then I heard the border was open and no one was asking about who anyone was, [...] no one asked who we were until Stockholm. (Interview 138-SWE)*

Additionally, against the backdrop of the existing **global visa regime** —specifically the visa policy of Schengen member states as well as the ones of Syria's neighboring states like Lebanon and Turkey that all restricted access in the course of the events in 2015 (as expressed

<sup>8</sup> The interviews took place in 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Another Syrian refugee-migrant stated: “Then we came to Turkey from Lebanon by ship legally. We didn't choose to come by plane because it was more expensive, we were searching for the cheapest way; we were saving our money for life in Turkey, we didn't want to spend it on the road, we expected that our sons couldn't find jobs in the beginning” (Interview 104-TUR).

in the national reports on borders)—one of the most decisive factors that conditioned the route and the means of transport being chosen was the availability of a passport and a visa. With a valid passport or travel document more “comfortable,” direct, and safe pathways and means of transportation could be taken. An example is by plane, as one Syrian woman articulated<sup>10</sup>:

*Yes of course because we've got passports [...] smuggling is much more dangerous, but we were able to get out regularly so why should we go through irregular routes?! We arrived in Turkey at Sabiha Airport and our entrance at that time was so easy; I remember that when we entered, there was, I'm not sure, but there was a special queue for Syrians at the passport control, that's what I remember. (Interview 20-TUR)*

For many families, the issue of not all having a valid passport or hence being in the position to take a flight spontaneously could lead to the family's separation, as this Syrian woman recalled:

*I didn't come illegally. I came in a legal way via the sea [with a ship from Tripoli to Mersin, just fifteen days before the Turkish government implemented a visa requirement and the ships stopped]. My husband entered illegally, his passport validity was finished, and if he wanted to renew it there would be a big problem in Syria. For me and my children, our passports were new, so we entered legally; my husband had to enter illegally, so it was hard for him. (Interview 106-TUR)*

Hereby, airports seem to be known as the most closely controlled border site, making it almost impossible to pass through them without a valid travel document. This was experienced also by this Syrian refugee migrant who arrived in Athens in 2014 via Turkey:

*I tried to fly a couple of times from different airports, from Thessaloniki, from Athens, from other airports, but I was not successful. You just need to be lucky, and I was not a couple of times. [...] It depends on the papers, the time of the flight, and the booking. Several conditions play a role, but the most important condition is that you have to be lucky. If you are lucky you can get through. I tried even from Crete. I got arrested, the reason was that I had illegal papers. [...] They kept me 20 days and then I went to Athens to try again. [...] I then traveled to Italy, [...] We jumped into a lorry and the lorry went on the boat. [...] It was a cotton seeds lorry; we had to sit behind them, and it was like a small hell. (Interview 27-UK)*

However, a handful of interviewees arrived in Austria, Egypt, Lebanon, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, Turkey, or the UK via airplane. All of them had a passport and some sort of visa — a few in the course of an invitation— or had a green passport in the case of Turkish citizens. Among the interviewees, 4 percent traveled with a tourist visa, 1 percent with a student visa, 3 percent with a short-term visa, and 16 percent with other types of visas. Thus visa travelers form only a small fraction of the whole sample, which illustrates the unconventional pathways migrants are forced to adopt in order to reach Europe. Some passports and visas were obtained with the help of smugglers meanwhile, and were fakes.

<sup>10</sup> However, there were also respondents who did have a chance to secure a visa, but as they didn't want to wait and wait for their appointment at an embassy or with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office they decided to take the “illegal way” instead. As this Syrian man recounted: “And then I went to Turkey. My fiancé had family in the UK. They said if you go to the UK, you can get a visa for all of you. So, I went to Istanbul with the hope to get a visa. When we went to the Red Cross [maybe UNHCR] office for an appointment, we arrived in Istanbul on August 14, went to the office on August 16, and got an appointment for March. I said I will not wait that long, and decided to take the illegal way” (Interview 28-UK).

The majority of respondents to all RESPOND countries traveled not by plane but via the different routes “on the ground” or across the sea, and that in a more or less undocumented, irregular way. Having to make the journey via irregular means can be seen as a direct effect of the carrier sanctions regulation promulgated by the EU, and its subsequent transference into national law by all member states. In this respect, border policies do not only structure whether a specific border crossing point can be taken but also influencing the whole mode of travel – and hence helping to construct the route.

This is consequently different from more laissez-faire policies in terms of crossing and entering a country, like in the time of the formalized corridor or of the open-door policy of Turkey and of the liberal visa policy of Lebanon. Eased restrictions allow people to cross the border in public transport like trains, buses, cars, taxis, and similar. In times of tightened border controls that aim more or less at borders’ closure or sealing off, the van, the lorry, or the truck that permit the hiding of a group of people seem to be among the most frequently used means (alongside walking).<sup>11</sup> In terms of reaching the UK, this became very obvious in interviews as there are two main means of arrival: via lorry across the English Channel (an irregular way) or by plane. As this Syrian refugee migrant who came to Great Britain via France in 2014 put it:

*Flying to the UK was one of the hardest things in the world, especially in these conditions. Most of the time people jump in a lorry and you cross, paying the driver. That’s it. I tried a couple of times and I did not manage; on some days it is more expensive, but it is more likely that you are successful. So, I just paid a bit more, like two grand more and I got to the UK. [...] It was very hard in the lorry. [...] I had to sit for eight hours in a box-sized area [he is a tall man]. It was tiring. [...] After arrival in Dover, they took me to London. (Interview 27-UK)*

The Greece-Italy ferry connection for passenger and goods transportation is another route that migrants used in order to reach the desired destination. The means used was again hiding underneath the lorry or inside the rear. The attempts to travel to Italy had different points of departure, as one informant remarked, including mainly the ports of Patras and Igumenitsa, but also the island of Corfu (Interview 36-GR). Hiding in a lorry or a truck was mostly described as a very threatening situation, with little air, being very warm, and with many people squeezed together. As this refugee who also arrived in the UK via the English Channel recalled:

*The smuggler put me with others in a lorry, I was put in a box. I stayed in the box, there were so many checkpoints. It was so difficult; the box was about the size of this computer [points to an Apple monitor on the desk]; I still have pain in my knees and shoulder. It was very tight, and I could not move. I stayed for sixteen hours in that box. (Interview 170-UK)*

Especially those who came via the Balkan route, the Syrian-Turkish border after its closure, the Iranian-Turkish border, as well as those who crossed several African countries to reach Mediterranean shores recounted horrendous and life-threatening experiences of walking through the desert (in one case for five days; Interview 11-AUT), over the mountains, at night, in the cold and snow, and of eating trees. As this Syrian man recounted:

<sup>11</sup> There is also a route from Greece to Italy where migrants use lorries to enter the big ferries and ships: “In Greece we had to hide under lorries so that the driver wouldn’t spot us. Then the lorry embarked the ferry and this is how I got to Italy. [...] We were hiding under the lorry before it embarked so that no one would know we were in the ship. We stayed there seventy-two hours” (Interview 49-HUN).



*We were walking through the mountains of Macedonia and there was no life there—only us. And in the last days we ran out of food and water—everything. I remember the last days I started eating trees. Because I was so hungry.* (Interview 149-GER)

Another Syrian migrant who crossed the border to Lebanon reported:

*If the security forces are not consistent in their raids [of the mountain area] and break their cycle, it causes people to stay up the mountain for several hours longer. Therefore, that group of people froze on the mountains, if you remember that story of the family freezing to death.* (Interview 98-LEB)

Two other Syrian respondents recalled their border-crossing experience to Turkey as follows:

*The most difficult part was on the Turkish borders. When the revolution started and Idlib was freed, they opened the borders and they allowed everyone to pass. But then they closed it and it required a visa. It became much difficult. Syrians became unwanted. We crossed the metallic wires walking, I will never forget that trip until I die.* (Interview 141-GER)

The same was experienced by Syrians who tried to cross to Lebanon via clandestine routes. This several interviewees recalled, among them this woman: *“Climbing the mountain was very difficult. You’re going up a mountain with six children, and it was hot. It was summer. We took four hours to climb the mountain, and we got to Beirut at night.”* (Interview 88-LEB)

Another more or less iconic narrative regarding the effects of the contemporary European border- and migration-control policies (Hess and Kasperek 2017) is the description of sea crossings from Turkey to the Greek islands, across the Evros River to Greece, and via the Central Mediterranean. Generally, refugee migrants who arrived via the Balkan route experienced this as the “most horrifying part”; others mentioned that their sea journey was mostly okay because of good weather conditions, the quality of the boat, and due to the fact that they were not intercepted. Among those attempting a sea crossing to Europe, 12 percent were rescued by state or non-state actors while a significant 61 percent received no assistance whatsoever. Many experienced difficult and life-threatening situations, as these Syrian interviewees shared:

*My situation was not so bad. I was a single male with enough clothes and money in my pockets, I didn’t have it as difficult as others. There were pregnant women, breast-feeding women, and old people who had lived in war-torn regions only shortly before, and who now were sitting at the edges of the forest waiting to enter a boat and drive out on the open sea. I felt their sorrows and pain. It was really hard.* (Interview 51-GER)

*The boat was not big enough for more than thirty-two of us, we left in the middle of the night at 1am and were on sea until 6am. We couldn’t see the land, only water. It was dark, and the waves were like a block of flats. It was really difficult, we all thought that was it and we were gonna die in the sea, but eventually we survived and managed to get from Turkey to Greece.* (Interview 49-HUN)

*The basic challenge was traveling via sea. The boat stopped four hours in the sea and there was the possibility that the ship sinks, because the engine was dysfunctional. I was in contact with a friend on the other side and decided that if anything happens, I’ll let her know so that she updates the coastguards. She did*

*inform them, and by the time they came the engine was working again and we were moving. It was an action scene. (Interview 139-GER)*

### **2.3. Supportive infrastructures – collective care**

Some migrants—mostly those who had made the trip via the Balkan route in 2015 at the time of the more or less open border situation—told the interviewers that they undertook the journey largely on their own, meaning without the help of smugglers and mostly in groups with other people also on the move. Thereby these migrants could rely on the information, guidance, and help of fellow travelers, on ethnic or religious networks, as well as on friends and relatives who had already made the same journey previously. Some were also supported by tourists offering a ride or food, by locals, volunteers, and NGO staff. Regarding the latter, a significant number of informants (48 percent) stated that they had experienced NGOs as a supportive actor during their journey.

Some respondents—especially those from Syria and other countries with well-established diasporas in Europe—reported that they not only received support from family members or friends with information and/or money but were also hosted by them for a certain period of time (especially in Turkey, as well as in the places of destination). Certain ethnic or religious networks (Kurds, Yezidi, Eritreans) also seem to have well-established support infrastructures along the main routes—sometimes for money, sometimes for free, as the following quote reveals:

*So, I called my aunt in Syria and told her I had made it to Italy, so she sent me more money and I bought a bus ticket to Rome. There are some people from my country who have a restaurant there in Rome. They told me hi, how are you, come and stay here with us. You know, they do business as well. It is like a hotel business. They call your relatives, they send money there, they take on their part, they buy you a ticket where you want to go. But until you get that money, someone with ID must access that money. So they have an ID card, we don't, so they say you can come and you eat with us. [...] So when you arrive at the bus station, if you are from my tribe they take you and they put you in that house, they give you food, they give you a place to sleep. They buy you a ticket. You will receive the money from your family, and they put you there for a bit, and don't charge. (Interview 30-GER)*

But many interviewees stated that they were looking for smugglers to help them organize and undertake the journey practically, whereby many hired smugglers for certain parts of the journey, a few also for the whole way as a package, and some were even accompanied by the person the whole way along (also by airplane, Interview 52-GER). Thus, what all interviews also expressed very vividly is the fact that most migration or flight activities, even if they start as individual attempts, eventually become collective actions. Very few interviewees stated that they made the journey alone; most not only mentioned the financial help and/or the information they got from family members or friends as essential conditions to start the journey but also stated that they made it together with a larger group of family members, friends, and even unknown persons. Many traveled also in groups of people who found each other along the route, as the following remarks indicate: “We formed a group of friends and then started the journey” (Interview 142-GER); “I found some group of people [in Istanbul] who also wanted to travel to Germany, and then we walked together” (Interview 24-GER, Interview 161-GER). As an Iranian woman recalled after being deceived and robbed by smugglers: “This was a very

bad situation, but then the small Afghan boys approached me saying that they would soon leave to Serbia and I could join them. So, I walked with them. This was the last chance not to walk alone” (Interview 50-GER). Collecting people in a group was also one of the main strategies used by smugglers.

Especially the insecure situations along the route demanded a kind of collective care, as people “had to protect each other”—as a Syrian male refugee recollected a situation where many migrants tried to enter a train and there were pregnant women in his group that needed special help (Interview 152-GER). Another male refugee stated: “I knew that I could trust them [the group he joined]—I was on the route with my small child” (Interview 56-GER).<sup>12</sup> And another one recalled: “It was just as hard as I thought it would be. My son has asthma, which made everything more difficult. My fellow asylum seekers helped though, and let him sit on their neck, Afghans, Arabs” (Interview 46-HUN).

## 2.4. Gender matters

The situation for female refugees was highly demanding, as they were mostly not only responsible for the children but also had specific hygiene demands and security/safety concerns. Many female respondents described how they came together as women:

*In Greece we stayed for ten days on Mytilene Island. The situation there was really bad. We were in tents next to the sea. No proper toilets were available, and to take a shower we had to use a long water hose. The situation was horrible. Women having their periods were struggling with hygiene problems. Once I just could not handle it anymore, so I formed a group of women who also wanted to take a shower and we all went to the sea. We had a natural bath there, in the sea. (Interview 147-GER)*

They not only helped each other but also formed temporary communities of care, as this female refugee recounted:

*There was a pregnant woman with twins in her belly. I was full of respect that she is taking this route in her situation. Another woman constantly fainted. On one hand I had my own son and on the other I was carrying the son of another woman. They were both of the same age. I thought he will get lost on his own. He was with us until we reached Greece. There we lost track of him. He was a small boy. (Interview 16-AUT)*

Migration journeys are highly gendered experiences also with regard to sexualized forms of violence, as the gender-specific migration literature as well as many reports by international organizations like UNHCR have repeatedly noted. A few female refugees in our sample,

<sup>12</sup> “So after the four hours that we were there, there came five Eritreans. Three women and two men. When they came into the house with us they had nothing on them. They didn’t have a phone, they didn’t have money, no one could communicate with them, the smugglers had robbed them all. Because they are not going back, because you are not legally there, you don’t know them, they are leaving their country—they do to them whatever they want. Anything at all. They didn’t have a phone to communicate even with their smugglers. So me and the Somali guy we needed to help them. Because I stayed in the border town for three days and I had studied who was who (who is the smuggler, who helps you cross the border and everything) then nobody was able to rob us. But these people were robbed. I had my phone and I had money. The Somalian guy had some little money. And then we had to help them” (Interview 30-GER).

coming especially from African countries, also reported on such “women experiences”—as one interlocutor put it who had been raped many times to pass the borders or to secure help from fellow migrants. We will address this gendered form of violence known as “transactional sex” in greater detail below (Interview 23-GER).

## **2.5. Border violence, unsafety, and risk—the border as violent situation**

Generally, many respondents, male and female, experienced in the context of their border crossings different forms of violence. This migrant summarized his journey from Afghanistan to Turkey thus: “There’s a lot of bad things that happened, I can’t remember them all. They pushed us, abused us” (Interview 131-SWE). Thereby direct, interpersonal forms of violence also practiced by state personnel have been seemingly increasing within the EU area as well as at the Turkish-Syrian and Syrian-Lebanese borders since 2015. Additionally, technical devices and other infrastructural means that have been increasingly employed to seal off the borders since 2015 have been experienced as intense forms of violence further to the harsh natural conditions that the border-control apparatus seems to be built on—such as deserts, oceans, rivers, and mountains. Some border areas and certain countries were repeatedly mentioned by respondents regarding violent practices and harsh treatment, forming hot spots that challenge international-protection regimes such as the European Convention for the Prevention of Torture or the non-refoulement principle (as one of the cornerstones of the 1951 Refugee Convention).

If we apply the wider notion of “safety” as laid down in the first articles (3–6) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we have to ascertain that most routes are unsafe as they expose fleeing migrants to a number of severe risks and agonizing uncertainties—most with life-threatening consequences. Migrants are exposed to labor exploitation under informal or even unfree conditions such as in Libya or Turkey, to very risky journeys through the desert, through mountains, or across the sea. This makes them dependent on the help of smugglers, and sees them forced to endure living conditions of a quality below the minimum standard regarding nutrition, health, and hygiene.

In this respect, only a few individuals could report having successfully reached the destination country at the first attempt. Many people tried several times to cross a particular border and into a given country (up to twelve times, as reported earlier). Arrest, detention, and release until the next attempt were part of the journey experience; in some cases, this became a routine known to the migrants and the border guards alike:

*Now this is something that is happening in a routine way. The person gets stopped at the checkpoint, the military man asks for permits and IDs, the ones that don’t have papers know as a fact that they will be detained for three to four days. I also noticed that the person then gets transferred to the intelligence services of the army or something like that, the last point would be to take the person to the General Security. Then after the whole process, the detainee will be released. (Interview 92-LEB)*

## 2.6. Interim conclusion

Summarizing, the experiences so far show some commonalities and characteristic features and dynamics mostly in respect of the time of the journey and of the route being taken. This is especially true in relation to the ways in which the border crossing was legally and practically constructed, but also with regard to personal and social factors such as the resources at hand and bodily characteristics such as gender, age, and (dis)abilities. But the accounts also reveal a lot of differences, and that fortune/luck is an equally important factor to take into consideration. In this way, many interviewees told the RESPOND teams that they tried several times to cross a particular border, to board a plane, to cross the sea—until they were finally successful.<sup>13</sup> Some experienced their journeys and border crossings like “hell,” and described how they were “treated like rubbish everywhere” (Interview 50-GER), suffering a “lot of trauma” (Interview 164-UK). But there were also few accounts that stated, as one single Syrian man put it, how “it was the best adventure of my life” (Interview 151-GER). A Syrian woman who was imprisoned for one day still claimed: “That was difficult, but for me it was fun because I could go out of the routine atmosphere I was living in” (Interview 121-SWE). Another refugee migrant summarized his experience in the following way:

*You flee from unsafe zones, because you believe if you don't flee, if you don't run away, if you don't hide, we will be arrested, we will be killed, we will be punished. [...] But when you come here, still you don't lose—I didn't lose my—hope. But I have been through a lot of risk, unsafety, traveling, hiding myself under the lorry, jumping onto the top of the lorry [...]. It's like a drama, it's really Hollywood, and you'd never believe you could do that— but you can do that. (Interview 169-UK)*

In this respect, the Balkan route in 2015 was specific in the way that certain transit countries issued (and still do so until today) national documents to persons who crossed their borders (in an irregular manner) expressing their will to apply for asylum that regularize(d) their stay—and hence their transit through the country—for a short period of time. This was the case with the seventy-two-hour paper issued by Macedonia and Serbia (Speer 2017; Tošić 2017). These documents were one of the central factors establishing the so-called formalized corridor, with most transit countries along the Balkan route organizing in a more or less coordinated manner the transit and border crossings along the route up until March 2016 (Lit).

<sup>13</sup> There were multiple failed attempts: “We were large in number and traveling by bus or car very quickly for fear of the Turkish police; just reaching the assembly point at the water's edge was very dangerous as there were incidents with some people who suffocated. Attempts failed due to the arrival of Turkish police or to the lack of a boat” (Interview 125-SWE).

### 3. The Balkan route in contrast to the Central Mediterranean route

#### 3.1. The humanitarian corridor through the Balkans of 2015 as an exception

*“This is the fast track to Europe.”* (Interview 12-AUT)

Against the backdrop of the mass flight of 2015–2016 along the Balkan route and furthermore given how this historical event would be quickly constructed as a “European refugee crisis” and an “emergency,” it is important to remind ourselves—as, indeed, one interviewee did—that flight and migration via this route are nothing new. Generations of people on the move had used it before, accumulating extensive knowledge along the way (on the history of its political regulation and governance, see Hess and Kasperek 2020):

*Yes, there is a route from Turkey to Europe, this route is well-known to all refugees: for example, Turkey–Greece–Macedonia–Serbia–Hungary–Austria. This route is not new, the people who speak Arabic—and there are twenty-two countries where people speak Arabic—know it. Also, the war in Iraq is nothing new, the refugees from northern African countries are not new—we simply know it via the Internet and Facebook.* (Interview 6-AUT)

But the mass flight in 2015 and 2016 was in fact a historically unprecedented event in terms of numbers; further, the countries along the Balkan route started to handle these mass mobilities in an exceptional way by not only allowing transit but organizing it more or less themselves. This created the aforementioned humanitarian or formalized corridor—existing from September 2015 until March 2016—with changing directions and with interruptions, such as the fence constructions by Hungary (Cf. Hameršak and Pleše 2018; Santer and Wriedt 2017; Tošić 2017, 151–154). This policy spread as a rumor of “open borders,” as many respondents expressed it:

*I went back to Iran and I heard that all the borders were open and that everybody could go to Europe. So I went from Iran to Turkey, then to Greece, then to Macedonia, and then all the way to Sweden.* (Interview 130-SWE)

In this respect, we can see from our material how the time, the months, and later on the week in 2015–2016 during which people tried to make the journey and cross the different borders along the route mattered: some interviewees described taking the route before September, pointing out how difficult it still was to transit the countries along the Balkan route as border crossings and stays remained illegalized and criminalized. A Syrian refugee recalled his experiences in reaching Germany in May 2015 after several attempts at transiting and phases of imprisonment:

*Then [in Istanbul] I met a guy who was older than me, he was twenty-four years old, we became friends. He prepared our trip to Izmir. Our trip in the rubber boat was so easy, the Greek coastguards came and took us after twenty-five minutes. I stayed in Greece for one week. In the beginning we were sleeping on the roads, and then we took the map and went to Athens with the ship. From there, I, my friend, and the group with us tried to continue the trip alone by walking. Some of them had experience with*



*it and we were always following the map. Macedonia was the most difficult part. I walked there twice. It took two weeks. The first time we arrived in the Macedonian capital; we were so tired, and were looking for a smuggler. In the group we had a girl who had cancer, so we said it's better if we get a smuggler. We agreed with a smuggler who took us to a collection point after a fifteen-minute ride, and told us that another car will come and pick us up. We figured out that he dropped us at a military airport. The army there saw us, made their weapons ready, and pointed them toward us. They started to talk to us, but we did not understand. We told them that we are Syrians and have nothing dangerous. They put us in handcuffs and took us to prison. We stayed there for three days. The prison was divided into two parts: people caught up illegally in cars and people caught illegally walking. They consider the one with the cars a case of smuggling. They told us that we should be grateful because we could be kept in the prison for six months if we were caught in a car. They put us in a closed cell. I had asthma, so I suffered a lot there. I did not have the spray. I told them that, but they did not care. They did not give us food at all, and only one bottle of water for the whole day. They decided later to take us out because we became so many in the room. Maybe six Syrians and forty Afghans. They put us all in a shipping container and returned us to Greece. In the next trial, we just walked. For more than a week. My friend was always helping and carrying me when I was tired. We arrived in Serbia, got the map and went to Belgrade with the train. We bought clothes and ate proper food after three weeks. We did everything by ourselves because we could not trust the smugglers anymore after we were robbed previously. We also did not have so much money. We walked from Serbia to Hungary from 9pm until 6am. My friend had another friend living in Budapest, we slept at his place and then he arranged a car for us, we gave him money and then left for Germany. (Interview 161-GER)*

At a time when crossing the Balkan region's borders was still illegalized, some migrants, as discussed earlier, reported to have taken life-threatening rides with lorries, vans, and trucks to make the journey. This changed tremendously in June 2015 – time-wise and with regard to the money spent<sup>14</sup> – while the risks also waned after Macedonia started to legalize transit by issuing the aforementioned seventy-two-hour paper by way of an amendment to its asylum law. Such a paper was known from Serbia, which had already a similar provision in its asylum law from 2007– initially introduced to give migrants who wanted to apply for asylum the possibility to legally pass on to one of the reception centers. However, in practice “these papers were used as short-term visas for transiting through North Macedonia and Serbia, handed out to hundreds of thousands of migrants” (Beznec, Speer, and Stojić Mitrović 2016, 17). This was the beginning of the state-run humanitarian or formalized corridor that was constructed by the different states directly involved for a number of reasons.<sup>15</sup> At its peak, “[it] consisted of trains,

<sup>14</sup> Also, in this regard the humanitarian and formalized corridor was an exception, making the journey possible also for people with fewer financial resources fleeing. As one person from Iran remarked: “You can't believe how little money I spent to get from Greece to Austria, you can't believe it. There were four or five countries in between, but I did it” (Interview 4-AUT).

<sup>15</sup> The highly visible protests by refugee migrants as part of the so-called March of Hope from Keleti train station in the Hungarian capital all along the motorway to Austria on September 4, 2015, were certainly one of the main factors leading to the construction of the humanitarian corridor. As historical reconstructions of the Balkan route up until its closure in March 2016 show, such visible protests happened along the route at any time when a border was closed (Beznec, Speer, and Stojić Mitrović 2016). Another incident that certainly somehow supported its construction was the incident where eighty-one refugee migrants were found dead hidden in a van after it was intercepted by the police on the motorway in Austria. This caused quite a public outcry, and gave rise to the humanitarian

buses and walking columns of refugees guarded and directed by the police” (Kasperek 2016, 6).

One interviewee put it like this: “The police sent us. At this time all borders were open, and the Greek police sent us to the next country and so on until Austria. This was the fact at that time. We only needed money for the tickets. And in each country, we got a paper” (Interview 5-AUT). Another described this new situation along the Balkan route in this way: “We have heard that months before the borders were closed and the people had many difficulties to get to Europe. But we were assisted by the police to be able to cross all countries, in order to continue our trip [laughing] and then we arrived here [in Austria]” (Interview 3-AUT). A further one summarized: “From the Greek island, it became like a trip: Athens–Macedonia–Serbia–Croatia–Vienna–Germany. All this way we were passed on and we were paying only a symbolic amount of money” (Interview 141-GER).

*This fast track to Europe,” as the respondent quoted at the start of this section put it (Interview 12-AUT), made it possible to do the whole journey in a very short space of time. Some reported doing the trip in “two days and a half” (Interview 162-GER). Another recounted that: “At that time, the surrounding countries had their borders opened. I remember we reached Germany in about ten days. We passed through Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Hungary, Vienna, till Germany” (Interview 115-SWE). Due to the speed of travel, some interviewees lost their bearings and had difficulty to remember the countries that they had passed through: “It was very quick, so I don’t know any more the countries we crossed. (Interview 50-GER).*

In contrast to the difficulties that the previous long quote revealed, many interviewees who took flight during this time period described their journey as “very easy” (Interview 7-AUT): “The state organized transport,” “moved us further on,” and “showed us how to go on,” as several respondents put it who reached Austria (Interview 3-, 5-, 7-, 8-AUT). Most refugees described that they “had no problems with the police,” that “the police helped us,” or even recalled that they “haven’t seen a single policeman until Serbia” (Interview 9-AUT). Another put it like this: “It was very easy from Athens to Vienna. We didn’t walk but we took the bus and the cab. This was really nice and easy, this was not difficult” (Interview 7-AUT).<sup>16</sup>

Additionally, those respondents who came via the Balkan route in the second half of 2015 and the beginning of 2016 also stated that they “got a lot of help from people” (Interview 18-AUT). “Cars came that took us to the next city” (Interview 41-GR) and even “tourists stopped and took [us]” (Interview 149-GER). There “were a lot of volunteers from different nationalities,” as some respondents would recall, “that were cooking for us. They offered us soup because it was so cold. I really remember this soup because it made me feel good” (Interview 145-GER). An interlocuter who arrived on one of the Greek islands expressed his surprise at how the authorities and locals treated them positively:

consensus that illegal border crossings should be entirely avoided. As this respondent remembered: “The police in Hungary and in Serbia were helpful to us. In this moment all people were helpful, as there was this incident with the eighty-one refugees who died in Austria. Then all were friendly with us, and wanted to help” (Interview 7-AUT).

<sup>16</sup> Only a handful of interviewees reported that they took a plane from Greece to their destination country: “After arriving in Athens, I and other people with me rented a house for five euros per day. When we went to buy coffee in Athens, we met someone who was arranging fake passports for people. And by this way, I traveled from Greece to Sweden by plane” (Interview 113-SWE).



*And then we arrived at a village. In the middle of the village was a park, a little one. And the police were passing by again and again, but they didn't arrest us. [...] They were seeing us, but they didn't arrest us. They were totally indifferent. The people from the village came and gave us new clothes to change. Then we found a local truck that gave us a lift to local police station in order to get registered, because the police were seeing us again and again and they seemed not to be bothered by our presence. I don't know how this is possible. (Interview 38-GR)*

Some others remembered being supported by the UN or the Red Cross—something that cannot be verified—as this Syrian woman reported: “We took a bus to Macedonia at our own expense. Then the UN were bringing us by bus until we arrived in Munich. They were providing food all the way” (Interview 141-GER). Other interviewees recounted the help and welcoming attitude of the local population: “I remember that the people from Macedonian, Bulgarian, and Serbian villages were very nice. They treated us as humans” (Interview 147-GER). Another praised the support of Greek people, who “were helping although they were receiving huge amounts of people” (Interview 144-GER). There were also situations like that which one Syrian migrant recalled: “We suddenly met a friend from back home, and he helped us to cross the border with a car” (Interview 149-GER).

### **3.2. The formalized corridor as a form of detention**

What most interviewees recalled was the fact that “there were so many people with us” (Interview 3-, 18-, 19-AUT), the lack of sufficient transportation, and the speed of the transit channeling. For many these were among the biggest problems encountered, as this Afghan refugee recollected:

*The biggest problem was public transportation. There were too few buses and cars. It was really a difficult situation to get on a bus. There were people who were waiting twenty, twenty-five days to enter a bus or a train. The trains arrived on a daily basis but there were too many people, so that it was really risky to enter them. (Interview 1-GER)*

The respondent went on to explain that due to this overwhelming situation around the trains he was separated from a close friend who did not manage to enter one for a whole week after he had left. But not only the crowdedness around transportation tore families and friends apart, so did the haste practiced by the police especially in Croatia too. This was experienced as difficult to handle and violent, as this Iranian man remembered:

*The police were not friendly, they often rushed us around as with the time in Croatia. It was 3am in the morning when the police came in the big hall where we were sleeping and told us that we should get up and get on the route. They rushed us terribly. Many lost their children. Many families were torn apart on the route because time and again they were hurried in such a way; they didn't care. But often it was not clear at all in which direction we had to go. If there hadn't been all these volunteers along the route, it would have been much worse. (Interview 52-GER)*

In this respect, the formalized corridor was not simply a situation whereby the involved states opened their borders; rather it was—as the literature indicates as well—a way of regaining control by channeling the mass movements of people in certain well-controlled ways. This was done by organizing transport, semi-legalizing the transit, and by opening up camps for

emergency care and registration. As Bernd Kasperek puts it: “They didn’t travel the route any more. They were hurriedly channeled along, no longer having the power to either determine their own movement or their own speed” (2016, 6).

The speedy channeling along the established official “transit route,” especially by Croatia and Slovenia, led to a situation that can be almost characterized as a deprivation of liberty. Exiting the “corridor on one’s own account to satisfy individual needs” was no longer possible as Marijana Hemersak and Iva Pleše also observed in their research. They conclude: “All this suggests the possibility to understand the corridor from Croatia and onwards as a specific form of detention”, more specifically as “a form of mobile detention” (2018, 24).

Thereby some respondents point to the fact that the countries along the route did not easily and continuously open their borders and arrange transit. Rather, many experienced also days and weeks of sudden border closures and reopenings, as reconstructions of the history of the Balkan route also demonstrate (Speer 2017). Most respondents could not understand the reasons or the criteria for that, as this interviewee who traveled with two sons recalled:

*We had so many problems on the journey. Often it happened that we couldn’t pass and cross the border. Often the borders were closed; they were closed for one or two days altogether. Then, we had to wait in front of the border. I don’t know why, suddenly the border was opened again another day. And there were so many people with us. Once I fainted as there were so many people around us. (Interview 18-AUT)*

And another one recounted:

*There was an old train, like the one in Aleppo which comes every twelve hours. When it came, people were throwing themselves in through the windows. We had a pregnant woman with us and we had to protect each other, so we could not get a place first, but then it worked. After getting out of the train, we got a paper that we need to leave Macedonia in forty-eight hours. When we arrived at the border with Serbia, we found 300 persons waiting to cross and we were another 300 people. So we became 600, like an army. The Serbian police came with their weapons and told us that we cannot cross here because there were cameras and that the German commandos will cause them problems should they see us. They allowed us to cross, but via a mountain (Interview 152-GER).*

### **3.3. Walking as a central characteristic of the Balkan route**

As indicated above, refugee migrants interviewed by the RESPOND teams voiced incredible walking experiences that seem to be a general characteristic of the Balkan route both before and after the formalized corridor existed: “We walked through Turkey and Bulgaria, for seven days” (Interview 17-AUT). In the winter months the weather conditions were an additional problem, as described by many who had to walk for days on end, sometimes even weeks: “We had to walk on foot so long, and it was cold; one month and ten days from Iran to Austria” (Interview 17-AUT). One refugee who arrived in the UK told the Respond interviewer the following:

*We separated in Greece. He went a different route and told me that he was with another guy, they were, by mistake they were climbing, and they were on top of the mountain, and there was snow and snow and snow for days and days and days. He*

*lost his life. He says we were cuddling him, we were hugging him, when he lost his life, we couldn't save his life. He was just frozen to death. So that start becoming part of your life, you never forget this stuff. You just see, whatever, you know [...]. It's really trauma. (Interview 169-UK)*

Among respondents, 20 percent belonged to the group of “vulnerable persons”, such as interlocutors with disabilities, women who were pregnant during the journey, elderly people, single parents with young children. Many informants referred to the difficult situation faced with these vulnerable group members: “It was cold, and we had three kids with us; one woman was pregnant, it was difficult, and we had to walk for fourteen days” (Interview 14-AUT). Another Syrian refugee recalled:

*The story that happened to me, the thing that affected me the most during the trip: I have a sister who has epilepsy. In Hungary we were walking, and the group was in front of us. My sisters and I were walking behind, and my second sister who has epilepsy became dizzy and had her crisis. She fell down and the group was in front and did not see us. I carried her on my back; I was really tired and had already walked for one day and the police was close; I had the idea that if the Hungarian police caught us and took my fingerprints, I will not have a future. It was very ugly. That affected me the most and I would never forget it, the situation of me holding my sister, running, and being so tired. When I saw the police, I collapsed, and I thought that's the point where they will catch us and that I need to give up. I kept running and then my sister woke up and felt the danger of the situation, so she started running with me until we found the pit. (Interview 155-GER)*

These memories and descriptions demonstrate that even at the time of the humanitarian and formalized corridor experiences differed greatly depending on the resources at hand of the refugee migrants as well as on their physical constitution. As the corridor had to be walked by many and over long distances, the body counted massively—indicating that gender, age, and disability were essential categories. We can thus speak of a “body politics” by the border regime. On the other hand, these descriptions also demonstrate that the Balkan route made it possible for whole families, pregnant women, and disabled/handicapped persons to make the trip—so that their numbers significantly increased in destination countries like Germany.

### **3.4. Unsafe flight route – unsafe places**

In the following, we want to shed light on central features of the individual countries along the Balkan route, addressing the question of the safety of this flight corridor. We start with Turkey, as for many respondents who came via the Balkan route their journey started there after arriving from countries further east like Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, or Pakistan, from Lebanon and Syria, or from ones further south in Africa—who had enjoyed liberal Turkish visa policies up until 2015 (Genc, Heck, and Hess 2018).<sup>17</sup> Some respondents stayed in Turkey only for a few days and directly transited further west, mostly via Istanbul to the coast and then across the Aegean Sea to Greece. Hardly any of the respondents who transited Turkey reported

<sup>17</sup> One respondent commented: “Actually, going from Uganda [...] as I told you that I had problems, so getting money resources for the airplane ticket was a bit challenging. So, [...] a bit challenging, but when I got the money, getting the visa wasn't so complicated by that time, to get the visa for Turkey. I got the visa, then I went to Turkey [...]” (Interview 47-HUN).

encountering severe problems. Some also went to Turkey as one of the closest neighboring countries hosting a number of embassies of imagined destination countries or international organizations like the Red Cross or UNHCR, in order to apply for asylum or a family-reunification visa (Interview 112-TUR).

Especially refugee migrants from Afghanistan, Iran, Syria, or certain African countries with somewhat established national, religious, and/or business networks, community infrastructures, and relatives in Turkey also arrived there with an unclear understanding of how long they would remain. Many stayed for couple of months up to a number of years, trying to settle down and build up a life—most supported by or using established infrastructures.<sup>18</sup> As this Syrian migrant remembered of their time in Turkey:

*So, we decided to leave for Turkey. My parents thought of staying there for a month or two until everything become safer at home. We ended up staying in Turkey for three years. My parents, three siblings, and I went to my uncle who was living in Istanbul. We stayed all in one apartment for eight months: my grandparents, all my uncles, and my family. My father, my brother, and I started to work immediately after arriving in Istanbul. We worked as tailors. It was exhausting. We were working for twelve hours per day for only 600 Turkish liras. I decided to move to Germany because I could see that I will not have a future in Turkey. I did not finish 9th grade at school before leaving Syria. I decided to leave for Germany to get an education. I left alone to make a family reunification for my parents and siblings later. (Interview 160-GER)*

Here the question of safety was mostly addressed as one of an insecure future: economic-wise but also regarding educational biographies and state protection against exploitation and discrimination. Most migrants who stayed in Turkey for a while and were interviewed by RESPOND teams further west or north stated that they decided to leave despite the fact that the majority could find a “job,” but one that was mostly “hard work” and not “paid well”<sup>19</sup>: many felt like they were being “exploited,” and the money was not enough to make a living. This a Cameroonian migrant who had left his country in the year 2000 and stayed in Turkey for one year expressed (Interview 24-GER). As many refugee migrants stayed in Turkey without legal title – only Syrians could get “temporary protection” (Gökalp Aras and Sahin Mencütek 2020) status, but they were excluded from the asylum procedure—renting a room, finding a job, and medical treatment were difficult to acquire and mostly more expensive than for Turkish nationals (Interview 1-GER). Also, most Syrian migrants reported that it was “financially hard” to make a living and there were not any prospects to follow up on their education, so that it ultimately did not pay off to stay in Turkey any longer in light of shrinking monetary resources, the affordable financial costs of flight, and the imagined prospects in European countries (Interview 159-, 157-, 161-GER). These three Syrians summarized the situation encountered in Turkey as follows:

<sup>18</sup> One respondent explained: “Not friends, but people who you meet there and can speak Farsi. You ask them to either give you some work or refer you to someone. But you, of course, don’t tell them you need it for the journey, but when you think you have enough you just leave” (Interview 49-HUN).

<sup>19</sup> The Turkish Respond team also interviewed several Syrian migrants who had decided to stay in Turkey for the following reasons: “The situation in Turkey is quite good, living standards are excellent, and the situation is quite stable, so my family was against the idea of migration. Migration means asylum” (Interview 20-TUR). Other arguments for staying in Turkey were its closeness to Syria, making it possible to go back and forth and visit relatives (Interview 22-TUR); others argued that in Turkey a similar culture and religion exists, especially in terms of gender relations (Interview 108,109,110-TUR).

*I tried to work, but it was too hard because I needed to work for almost ten hours a day for like the basics. I was getting 400 euros a month and I was working for ten hours a day, six days a week. About 1,000 Turkish liras. So I knew that if I stayed there, I would not have a future. I can't speak the language. Of course, I learned the basics but there was no help for me to learn the language. And I had to work and work and work. I don't have a problem with working, but there is a line. I was not able to work ten hours a day, six days a week. That was too much for me. And I knew that I had a future that I wanted to build, and so I decided to come to Europe. (Interview 149-GER)*

*I was working for seventeen hours per day, and getting only 40 percent of the benefits. That's exploitation. When I found this out and saw that I have no future and I could not continue my studies, I decided to leave. I saved 4,000 dollars. I worked more and more because I had a goal. My friends who went to Sweden and Denmark were telling me to come because they are making their future. (Interview 152-GER)<sup>20</sup>*

*I only spent three months in Turkey. I didn't have so much money, therefore I couldn't stay longer with my wife and my children. I had money, but not that much; if I rent a flat or send my daughter to school then I have to pay, 400 dollars perhaps and this is too much. Therefore, I thought as long as I have money, I have to get to a country where I am safe with my children, where they have a future, and where I can find work etc. (Interview 6-AUT)*

Most respondents who made the journey up until 2016 crossed the European external sea border between Turkey and Greece, arriving at one of the five Greek Aegean islands. Only one respondent who made the journey in 2017—coming after the official closure of the Balkan route with the EU-Turkey deal of March 2016 and of the Greek-Macedonian border—crossed the Turkish-Greek land border at the Evros River that was no less life-threatening:

*We pushed the boat, and then, in the middle of water, the boat was going down, there was a terrible stream. I saw the woman and her daughter crying and shouting, I jumped to the river, I thought the water would not be high. I saw it was true, good, I held the boat, started walking, I was feeling the stones under my feet; there was a strong stream, I had to keep the boat afloat. We had to pass, we could not return. The tides got higher, and I got scared. I said, I could not go further, I think the waters are deeper. There is a psychological thing; you experience a different thing there, you pass into a different dimension, you do things that you would not do in normal life, you suddenly are braver. I decided that I do not care; I will go to the wall on it. We would either die or pass anyhow. I started walking and shouting, like in the movies. I was scared of course. Then the tide went higher and then down again, and I saw the other side and assumed we had little left, because the water was very low. I said we had finished. I said get off, they did so. There was a void there to our surprise, we assumed it was flat, but it was not, and the women stepped on, fell in the water. The other man held her from her neck, otherwise she would have gone adrift. So we stepped our foot on the opposite side, to Greek land. (Interview 171-GER)*

The crossing of the maritime border was for many a life-risking activity, dependent on the quality of the boat, the competence of the smuggling service (life jackets, amount of people,

<sup>20</sup> All amounts given in dollars throughout the report refer to United States dollars.

with or without someone who was trained in steering a boat, etc.), the weather conditions (waves), the reactions by the different coastguards, and the availability of rescue services. As these statements nicely summarized it:

*I tried more than five times to cross the sea. Once the boat sank, once the driver of the boat did not know how to drive it, once the coastguards came and caught us. (Interview 157-GER)*

*We tried to leave with the rubber boat twice to Greece, but it did not work. The first failure was because of the Turkish coastguards and the second one was because of organizational issues. The smuggler did not come with us; one of the people leaving by boat had to drive it, but he did not know how to do that. He was driving in circles and bringing us back to Turkey. He did that three times. (Interview 159-GER)*

A couple of respondents also reported being rescued out of dangerous situations either due to a technical problem, the conditions at sea, the incompetence of the driver, or as a consequence of intentional destruction of the boat by coastguards, as these two statements reveal:

*I tried three times to leave Turkey. During the first trial, we were supposed to be forty-five people in the rubber boat, but we were sixty-seven. After two hours at sea, a huge military boat came. We learned later that it was for the European commandos to control the sea. Three people jumped into the rubber boat and one of them had a weapon. He tore the rubber boat, ruined its motor, and told us: 'Goodbye donkeys.' He wanted to tear the rubber boat again but a woman who had a baby with her held the baby up and told him: 'Baby, baby.' So, the friend of that man told him that's enough and they left. At that time, I was in contact with my brother and cousin. They called the Turkish and Greek coastguards. The Greek coastguards told them that they saw us on the radars and that we are still ok in the water. And since we were in Turkish waters, they could not do anything for us. The Turkish coastguards then came, and they saved us. They were nice. They took from us the life jackets, maybe they sell them again, and they took us to a sports hall. We slept there for four nights; three meals per day were provided for us. Then we returned to the hotel and we contacted the smuggler who gave us back our money. We tried again with the same smuggler, but this time we had to sleep up a mountain during the night to leave at 5am. It was so cold, and we were covering ourselves with nylon bags. The waves were ok then, but the driver got scared since there were rocks. He froze and could not drive anymore, the rubber boat turned around three times and we hit a rock. The rubber boat was torn, and we had to swim for a hundred meters. The Turkish coastguards also came, treated us nicely, and took us to a police station where we slept for ten hours. They gave us food. They took our names, fingerprints, and they gave like an ID. In the third trial, we were gathering but the police came and told the smuggler that the waves are so high today and that we don't have to leave so people don't die. The smugglers were friends with the police. There was corruption. The next day at 12pm, the smuggler called me and told me that someone will come and take us with a taxi to go to the meeting point where the rubber boat will leave. We left at 1pm and we were forty to forty-five people in a good rubber boat. We arrived in Mytilene at 4pm. (Interview 153-GER)*

*We were around fifteen people: us, the three families' members, and two other guys from Algeria. The son of my sister-in-law drove the rubber boat. The smuggler only*

*showed us the point where we should go. It was a really hard experience. We prayed on the beach before sunrise, and could see that the waves were really high. We told the smuggler that we don't want to go; he assured us that those waves are not considered high. My husband and I refused to leave but at the end we just did. My husband had surgery on his back ten days before leaving Turkey. We told the doctor about our plan and asked him if this can affect the health of my husband through getting water in the wound or so on, but he gave us permission to go. In the middle of the sea, the motor of the boat stopped functioning, and it started to deflate. We had life jackets; their prices were included in the payment to the smuggler. Everyone panicked. We stayed for hours out at sea. The boat started to move with the waves, as if we were a toy in the hand of a kid who is moving us left and right. It was so scary. I will never forget this moment at all, until I die. Different people had different reactions, one woman started to cry and scream, another one started to feel dizzy. But for me, I just froze. No tears. I felt that my life then came to my mind as a movie starting with my childhood up until the moment of me being in the boat. I don't remember what I did, if I prayed or started to read the Quran. The son of my sister-in-law knew a bit of Turkish and called with his mobile phone the Greek coastguards. They could understand Turkish. They did not come. A ship with the Canadian flag came and rescued us in the last moments; the water was entering the boat then. International people were on the ship, speaking English, French, German. They took us to Mytilene. (Interview 143-GER)*

Having reached the EU and the Schengen Area, most respondents we interviewed in Austria, Germany, Hungary, and Sweden who did their flight-journey via the Balkan route reported about different forms of physical violence (mainly beatings and robberies), of detention, and very bad living conditions—as we outline in greater detail in the subsequent section on “Border violence.” Thereby, those who arrived in Greece up until 2016 only remained there for few days as it was not imagined as a country to stay in by most of our respondents; many did not recollect concerning themselves much with the situation there, as if their whole goal to reach European countries further north made them rush rapidly to the Macedonian border to get going on the Balkan route. What was often remembered was the intimidating and mostly violent situation encountered on the landing of the boat, and the awful living conditions—especially on the Greek islands, where some had to stay in tents without any hygienic infrastructure. As this woman relayed: “The hygienic conditions on the islands were very bad—especially for women” (Interview 147-GER).<sup>21</sup>

As indicated above, the experiences of the crossing of inner-European borders along the Balkan route were highly dependent on the point in time at which the journey was made. The following commonalities and characteristics can nevertheless be detected from the interview material. Especially, how the characteristic feature of the Balkan route that fleeing migrants had to walk miles to cross the territories and borders of the respective countries semi-legally or clandestinely brought about specific risks. They were not only exposed to the geographic and topographic

<sup>21</sup> Alternative experiences were also described too however: “Then the coastguards received us and they coordinated us via speakers. They took us to the port where the Greek police, the Red Cross, TV channels awaited us; the reception was more like a celebration. There were flowers, fruits, and clothes. Then they took us with buses to a collective reception center on the island, one providing the Greek exit documents (*khartiye*). It was strange that they charged us 1.5 euros for the ride. Then a guy was waiting for us; we gave him our IDs for the exit documents. It didn't take more than one to two hours till we finished” (Interview 123-SWE).



conditions as well as the weather; being on such routes also meant being and sleeping mostly under rough conditions, in the mountains, in the forest, in old, abandoned buildings. Regarding Serbia in particular, some described having stayed “for weeks in a jungle” or “some forest”:

*The hardest part was in Serbia. The police made it so hard to enter Hungary, so that we had to walk through the mountains. We had an old man with us who was nearly dying because of the difficult road. We found an old, uninhabited house and we stayed in it for a day in order to rest and to hide. We were super hungry and half-dead from tiredness. (Interview 160-GER)*

This meant additionally that they were also exposed not only to the mistreatment of state personnel and smugglers, but to a great extent also to the behavior, the mercy, of the local population.<sup>22</sup> Nearly half of our respondents reported having been robbed by the police, smugglers, and/or being robbed or attacked by locals along the route in Macedonia, Serbia, and Hungary: “The police in Macedonia were very aggressive, also in Serbia. We met thieves on the way, our phones and money got stolen in Macedonia” (Interview 44-HUN); “In Serbia the police took all the money we had on us. And after they robbed us, they gave us a paper and told us that we should move on” (Interview 17-AUT). Another Syrian migrant recalled being betrayed to the police by Hungarian villagers:

*When arriving at the Hungarian border we saw the police and hid until they left. Then we entered a village, the old people living there saw us and started to call the police. The police came and took all of us to Budapest. There they asked: ‘Who wants to continue, and who wants to go back to Serbia?’ Because they wanted to take us back to Serbia, they wouldn’t leave us there. We all decided to stay. (Interview 160-GER)*

*Back then, Hungary was so dangerous. There were a lot of thieves along the way, and they were taking advantage of people by stealing their money and their stuff; and so [...] I was afraid to be honest. I was afraid, but I thought ‘We did all this, it’s all crazy, so let’s make it crazier.’ So, we went, we walked through the night, and we crossed the borders. And the moment we crossed the border we just saw headlights on us, and suddenly there were the police. (Interview 149-GER)*

Whereas for Macedonia and Serbia most mentioned that they were robbed by civilians, smugglers, and/or the police but regardless for the most part could continue their journey, for Hungary many narrated being intercepted by the police after having crossed the border, being beaten, arrested, and detained for between a few days up to a number of weeks: “In Hungary we were caught by the police in the woods eventually. The youngsters were beaten up [...]” (Interview 46-HUN). Others recounted: “We didn’t meet police anywhere, first in Hungary—there we were beaten up” (Interview 46-HUN); “We were put in a cell without asthma sprays” (Interview 44-SWE). Interlocutors also reported that they received only little food, and necessary medicine was refused. One woman summarized: “They were treating us in a very inhuman way. They were reacting to us as if they were disgusted by our presence” (Interview 147-GER). Another believed: “They had a kind of hatred toward us” (Interview 158-GER). If

<sup>22</sup> There are, as noted earlier, also many descriptions of the Balkan route that involved hardly seeing any police and passing through very easily. As this quote reiterates: “Leaving Afghanistan, I was walking a lot, then I got on a bus. From Iran to Turkey we traveled a few hours by bus, then walking again; it was mid-2014. Then we crossed the sea from Turkey to Greece. We were quite a big group, then we walked for about twenty-one hours. We didn’t meet the police at all. At night we left to Macedonia on foot. We left at 9am and got there at 1am the next day. I don’t know which countries we crossed, but eventually we got to Hungary” (Interview 46-HUN).



the migrants mentioned a reason for this hostile reception, they mostly referred to the context of fingerprinting and registration for the EURODAC data bank; others believed that the police just wanted to intimidate them:

*In Hungary they took us to a police station and started to threaten us. He told us if you don't give your fingerprints here, they will keep you in jail for five years and make you pay a fine. Some people knew that he was lying and refused to give their fingerprints, others were scared and accepted. I agreed to give my fingerprints. I feared jail. I did not have any other information. They told us it is the fingerprint of criminals. Then they allowed us to leave. We went and ate, and then took a car directly to Germany. (Interview 160-GER)*

If Croatia was mentioned, then it was mostly in connection with unfriendly and rude behavior by the police: "In Croatia we were treated like dirt by the police. In Zagreb they threw our things around and shouted at us why had we come to their country, that we do not have any rights, and that they will send us back. I was terrified. Similar to Macedonia and Serbia, also here there was no medical treatment for us; and generally, no rights for us" (Interview 50-GER).

There were also several descriptions of pushbacks, in the time before 2016 mainly by Macedonian police. As this migrant recalled: "I thought it will be difficult, but I had no other choice. I didn't know too much when I left. I was caught by the Macedonian police and pushed back to Greece. I was caught in Serbia too, I spent two days in prison" (Interview 46-HUN).

### **3.5. The Central Mediterranean route – "the death route"**

Compared to the relative ease with which many refugee migrants talked about their experience of transiting the Balkan route and even compared to the hardship, pain, difficulties, and violence that many suffered along the way, the accounts of those who came via the Central Mediterranean route are of a different dimension altogether—especially with regard to the level of violence and life-threatening risks that they were exposed to. In this regard it is also indicative that across the whole RESPOND sample of interviews with those originating from African countries and who had come to Europe via the Central Mediterranean route not one single individual clearly mentioned that he or she had arrived together with their entire family. Only Syrians who made their journey via Egypt and Libya came as families.

Those within the RESPOND sample who came from African countries and crossed the continent to reach Mediterranean shores – mostly by foot, car, or truck; only very few recounted having traveled by airplane with a visa (Interview 78-ITA) – reported having been on the route for between several months up to several years. Some had not planned their entire trip from the very beginning but did it step-by-step; others had to interrupt their journeys to earn new money. As this migrant recalled:

*I came to Ghana, where I didn't stay long. Then Burkina Faso, then Niger, all in the car. From Niger to Algeria, where I worked in the fields for the olive harvest; there I met people who made it to Libya. They told me that you earn more here. At the end of 2014, we went to Libya. (Interview 81-ITA; see also, Interview 111-GER)*

Most of these respondents experienced a number of difficult border-crossing situations, partly due to the natural landscapes such as the Sahara Desert, partly due to militias controlling certain parts of the region via their own checkpoints, and partly due to the nation-state control

apparatus also practicing different checks all over the respective countries—with the effect that the actual national border was not the most important control space. Hereby militias and rebels were also deeply involved in the smuggling business themselves (Interview 111-GER; Interview 63-ITA): “Nothing is easy during the journey, you cross Senegal and then Mali and every checkpoint you pass if you don’t have money you are beaten by the police, they put you in prison” (Interview 59-ITA; “Then in Burkina Faso, every checkpoint they ask for a lot of money, and if you don’t pay they beat you, they have electricity [...]. They beat a lot of people there, and you have to pay the money” (Interview 60-ITA). Many stressed the importance of having money to bribe guards in order to pass safely, as also this man did: “In Senegal, Niger [...] crossing the borders, you have to pay money. If you don’t have the money, they tell you that they have to deport you. You have to pay the money to be free, to continue the journey” (Interview 57-ITA). An Eritrean refugee migrant also reported kidnap occurring along the route: “But if you get caught, you will be sold. If some ordinary guy catches you; if he is Sudanese, he has the right. He will sell you to the smugglers” (Interview 30-GER).

For women this situation at border-crossing points often meant gender-specific forms of violent interactions. This kind of sexualized violence was almost never reported by women who had transited the Balkan route. As this woman from Cameroon recalled: “There is some, there is some border that, there is some border that, if you are a woman, they would propose that you sleep with them, so that you pass. So that there are so many things, she had faced so many things” (Interview 23-GER). The risk of being badly treated, hurt, and detained was seemingly high, as many interviewees from African countries had experienced forms of detention ranging from several days up to a number of months; most passing through Libya suffered imprisonment there, as the central point of disembarkation to Europe (Interview 57-, 58-, 59-, 60-, 61-, 69-, 70-,77-ITA). Only very few respondents crossed the Mediterranean via Algeria, Egypt, or Tunisia; most did it via Libya.

Thereby respondents stayed in Libya for between only a few days up to several years (four or five) in different social and economic situations. Some stayed on their own and worked freely as cleaners or construction workers. Others lived in rather unfree situations, ranging from unfree labor in private situations to prison-like camps and slave labor. As this migrant recalled: “I was detained in Libya once. It wasn’t a prison, they just keep you together to work, they beat you. They used me to work” (Interview 62-ITA). Another shared that: “I was kidnapped in Libya. I was with six to seven people, and we were working for this person. Then this person brought us to the coast to take the boat.” (Interview 72-ITA, also 58-ITA).

Some recalled unbelievable situations of imprisonment, violence, and brutally enforced slave labor, ones that they could hardly bring themselves to speak about. Some interlocutors did not want to be reminded of the experience, and so refused to talk about their time in Libya all together. Not so one Eritrean refugee; he somehow desperately wanted to talk about his experiences after staying for five months in a prison-like camp there and being forced to work. Everything took a turn for the worse when the truck taking him and a further sixty migrants from the Niger-Libyan border to Tripoli was intercepted at a military checkpoint:

*The difficult part was from that border town until the capital, Tripoli. So, what happens is that they put us inside a container. There is a big truck, and they make a hidden compartment under the container at the back of the truck. We get in there, in that tight space, and on top comes a big load. If the police think that you are there, still they cannot find you. It is well hidden. So, we sat like this [makes gestures showing how tightly they were sitting together]. We can’t wear anything. Only shorts. Because it is*

extremely hot, and there is no air. So what happened was, it was the middle of the night, one of the tires of the truck blew out and the driver did not have a spare. So, he had to call his friend in Benghazi. In that instance there was a little opening, he opens a flap and left it open for us to breathe a bit. We were in the middle of nowhere and there were no police, so he opened the flap a little bit. So his friend came, and he changed the tire. There is a place called Misrata, just a little outside of Tripoli. There's a military camp there. So, what happened was that as you pass through there the military police checks everything. They checked the truck. They noticed that the flap that was open, and they knew we were hiding in there. So, they opened fire on us. They shot the load and shouted and told the truck to stop. They took the driver out, and they hit him very hard. Then they took us to prison and they leave us there. [...] They only fed us at night. When they fed us, they shouted 'food, food' and three or five people made a circle and they gave us one plate of food together, and we ate from that plate. The food was very little, and we could not satisfy our hunger. But when you are in that state you care for each other. That is the best part of this. Because nobody is there for you. We are not legally there, and they can kill us anytime. If you go out into the corridor, they hit you with this metal chain, it is very heavy. They hit you very hard. They take drugs and this is the police! They hate specially the people from Chad. I don't know why, but they hit them sooo hard. They didn't touch the women, they let them go out and walk around sometimes. As far as I was there, they didn't touch them. But the men, they hit them very hard. We could not communicate with the women. Only on Friday at night. Because it is Djuma, a special day for Muslims. They let you communicate with the women and the women tell the guards who they want to talk to. If the woman says she wants to talk to me, I'll be called and come to a room where there are bars and we talk through the bars. And then we will talk for fifteen minutes. Only on Fridays. Then people from the town, if they need laborers, they come and give some money to the guards and take some refugees with them: some five or six. You work there for free; if you are lucky, they give you food. Then they bring you back after two days or so. It is a big thing: to breathe some fresh air and to walk about a bit. We work hard, but you are happy because you are in a cage with no water, the toilet is there in the middle, you sleep tight, on the floor. Some 360 people in the same place. Not in the same room, but in each room; it was full of people. People sleeping in the corridor. Anyway, one day we heard shots and screams outside. The police had shot a truck. A friend of mine told me that they found some more refugees hiding inside a truck. There was a baby hiding in the truck and it started crying. The police then told the driver: 'Take out the people hiding in there.' But the driver said 'No. I have no people there. You can search.' So, the police searched and couldn't find anyone. But the police warned they would shoot if the driver did not open the compartment and let the people out. The driver insisted there was nobody there. 'Do whatever you want.' So, the police took one shot at the truck, but nothing happened. So, he changed to a bigger weapon and shot at it again. The driver kept saying 'no.' So, the police open fire and shot about seventeen rounds. And when that happened one guy got shot, my friend got shot three times, and they all remained quiet. And the police kept shooting. People got shot all over the place. Arms, legs, and then they started to scream. So then the driver opened the truck and the people came out. The police took them directly to prison, no hospital. There were some dead people, and those they took away. My friend who got shot three times, one bullet went through his kidney. They gave him no drugs to relieve his pain, nor

*anything to clean the wounds. So, we put some money together and gave it to the guards and asked them to get us something for my friend. But instead they asked us to come out of the cell and downstairs, and when we got there we were hit hard—elbows, legs, arms, [...] very hard. You are not human to them, so they don't care if you die. (Interview 30-GER)*

Another refugee migrant from Nigeria who finally arrived in Austria after a nine-month journey through the Saharan Desert, Libya, and Italy recalled his time in the North African country similarly:

*You know Libya, there is a life; when you go out in the morning, you do not know if you will come back home. There is mafia to beat you up, they want some money. Death camps, you don't talk but they have camps. You see this mark here [points at arm]? This was a camp in Libya [inaudible]. Blood was everywhere, it was the life of a slave. You cannot talk. S. told me that there is a guy called Muhammad, he didn't tell me what he does, and I should go to him and say something happened to me and he would know what to do. That's what he told me [inaudible]. He took me to a place I don't think I will ever forget in my life, he took me to the Mediterranean Sea; I got there with so many people and this boat is going to Italy; anybody who is not going, they will shoot at him. You do not have a choice. I got in the boat and we were hundreds or seventy-something [inaudible], so there are things I do not talk about. I do not talk about the things that happened at sea, the color of the sea, I do not talk about it. (Interview 11-AUT)*

He was finally rescued, but still heavily traumatized:

*You know where I was rescued from the sea, from the Mediterranean Sea. In Italy, I wasn't sleeping, I was dying, I was very sick. Any time I would close my eyes I would be on top of the sea, and there would be many people that shout; all these things are in my head. (Interview 11-AUT)*

While some migrants who crossed the Aegean described this part of their journey as the most “horrifying” and difficult one, experiencing life-threatening situations with the Turkish or Greek coastguard or due to weather conditions or technical problems with the boat that made it necessary for them to be rescued, all descriptions of the crossing of the Central Mediterranean expressed a deep dread. Most of the latter experienced situations seeing “the death in front of their eyes,” as this Syrian migrant who came to Libya via Egypt recalled:

*The most terrible part was the trip from Libya to Italy. It was very difficult. We tried it twice, and the second time we managed to reach Italy. The first time the steering wheel broke. And this boat was built for fifty people, but we were 200. It was so dangerous. We had seen the death in front of our eyes [...]. I think, that this journey is also called the death route. We didn't know if we will survive or not. (Interview 15-AUT)*

Another Syrian migrant who also came to Libya via Egypt had a similar memory of the sea crossing that sometimes took several days. Whereas he flew from Syria to Egypt, and from Italy to Sweden with a fake ID, he was forced to take the boat to cross the EU's external border and reach Italy:

*We did it illegally with a boat. It was horrible. It took nine days at sea. I think I lost a lot of weight. You never know when you are going to touch the soil again or reach*

*land. At many points we were saying 'Ok, let's go back to Egypt,' because we are not reaching anywhere. Because usually it takes four to five days, but it took nine days for us. I thought 'Ok we are lost, we will die, and nobody is gonna reach us.' It was at the same time as the trip where 400 to 500 African people died when coming from Libya to Italy. My parents thought that we were among them, and that we had died. (Interview 151-GER)*

Several respondents reported that they were rescued by different boats such as commercial ships, a military one (Interview 126-SWE), or by specific rescue boats:

*In our case, the ship was not the refugee ship. It was just a commercial ship that took us on board. The captain told us that it is a must, a rule that if you see someone at sea that you try to rescue them. He saved us. They gave us their clothes and their shoes in the big ship. There were many workers from the Philippines I think, and they helped us, they treated us. It is not their responsibility, but they were there for us and it was their first time I think. The captain was Polish, and we ate there all together and they treated us good and everything. So, when we got to Catania, they gave us food and everything, they took us to a gymnasium, in a school, indoors, and there were showers and they gave us food. (Interview 30-GER)*

But sometimes help came too late, as in the case of a Gambian refugee migrant who lost his brother at sea:

*Yeah. I mean because our boat was, was leaking, the water was coming inside. And the water was coming inside, and there were so many people who passed away here; there was so much water coming in. And there was no option other than the rescue boat, still a bit far away from us. Yeah. Then from there, then they just come directly to us, near to us, but they didn't come closer. Like, fifty or a hundred meters away, and they stand there; then they, the small boats come. Then picking up people. But he didn't make it. (Interview 31-GER)*

## 4. Border violence

The 507 interviews that the eleven RESPOND teams conducted included several narratives of diverse forms of violence coming from various sources. Some 13 percent of interlocutors reported having been subjected to forms of physical or psychic assault *en route*. This can be interpersonal violence by official authorities, smugglers, or by other individuals taking advantage of the precarious conditions of the refugees as well as forms of structural violence, violence through technological devices, or as an effect of the natural conditions. The nature of the violence can be direct or indirect. It can be based on the legitimacy of the state to enforce violence based on border- and/or migration-related policies as well as in line with the general security policies that have been increasingly introduced since 2015 with the aim of more rigidly controlling migration and sealing off the borders of the EU and of its member states (Kasperek and Karamanidou 2020). Sites where people repeatedly experienced different forms of violence are the following ones: the Iranian-Turkish, the Syrian-Turkish, the Syrian-Lebanese, and the Turkish-Greek border areas; thereafter, the Macedonian, Serbian, Hungarian, Libyan, Ethiopian-Sudanese, and Niger-Libyan border areas; and, finally, the borders of Russia. Yet despite the copious stories of violence, there are also migrants within the sample who did not go through such experiences and recalled only positive interactions with the people they met during their journeys.

### 4.1. Direct, interpersonal violence

Direct forms of violence by the authorities were physical, psychological, and eventually both. Violence against refugees was exercised as a means of discouraging or preventing them from crossing borders. The level of violence can be seen as occurring in direct relation to the specific migration and border policies performed by the respective countries. Closed/sealed-off borders are seemingly accompanied by more severe forms of violence by those whose role is “protecting” the integrity of the border, as we can see in the case of Hungary or Turkey—where technical devices such as fences and ditches seem to be insufficient to really achieve the intended effect. On the other hand, arbitrary forms of control and violence also occur extensively in such borderscapes that seem to be only under the marginal sovereign control of the state and/or where border-control practices are rather part of general state-security regimes like in some parts of Africa or as is the case on the Syrian-Lebanese or the Iranian-Turkish borders.

#### 4.1.1. Violence by authorities

The most severe acts of direct and intentional violence against migrants that were reported were shootings, heavy beatings, as well as rape—which in some cases led to severe injury or even death (whereas the non-rescue policy of Italy and Malta in the last three years has a similar effect). The interviews referred mainly to the Iranian-Turkish, Syrian-Turkish, as well as several African border areas as ones in which shootings took place.

A number of migrants who came to Europe via the Central Mediterranean route recounted shootings—especially, as noted earlier, in Libya. However Syrian interviewees also experienced shootings by the Turkish army while trying to cross the border, probably after Turkey rescinded its open-door policy in 2015. It was not clear to the interviewee whether this act was intended to actually harm them or only to scare them. A Syrian migrant who was

accompanied on the journey by small children recalled the situation as highly traumatizing and difficult:

*It was tough, and we traveled for a long time. I had my sister's children, a boy he was four years old and a seven-month-old girl. My sister and I took our belongings, and we walked about five kilometers into the woods, and we were afraid. Sometimes there was shooting from the Turkish army. But we were terrified. We have fled war and destruction, and here we were receiving fire; the situation was tough. (Interview 114-SWE)*

*The smuggler watched the border and told us when to cross. We tried six times at night before we managed to cross. During the day they see you, so it should be at night. Once the police shot at us, once they caught a family. They were letting the people pass family by family, so once the family in front of us was caught. It was very hard. Another time they were shooting as well. (Interview 141-GER)*

Another Syrian female migrant who tried five times to cross the Syrian-Turkish border reported a similar situation, but finally made it to Turkey even under the gaze of a border guard:

*I left Syria to Turkey through walking with smugglers. The official road between Syria and Turkey was closed. It was so difficult. We tried five times to cross the border. But with every trial we had to run from the Turkish police and the shooting. We would return then to Syria and try the second day. Even in our last trial to cross the border, they started to shoot in the air to scare people. The entire group with me started to run in the dark and I lost my sons. While running I fell on the ground, and my pants were destroyed. I could not walk anymore, and I started to cry and wonder where my sons are. A Turkish policeman was very close to me, I could not see him in the dark, but I could hear his voice. He told me to leave. I thought that he will arrest me, but he allowed me to leave. Maybe because he empathized with me when he saw that I was a woman alone and not able to run. (Interview 143-GER)*

There are also a couple of testimonies by those who were subjected to shootings in the border area between Iran and Turkey, where it was not clear exactly who was responsible—the Iranian military and/or police or Turkish border guards. Some informants stated that they experienced direct intimidation, with guns used in order to make migrants flee (see also, Interview 3-AUT); in one case it led to the death of migrants:

*It took a few days from Iran to Turkey and we had a lot of difficulties, they put guns to our heads and said 'You have to run, if you do not run I am going to shoot you.' There were a lot of small mountains, hills, it was not flat, it was so difficult to climb and climb and run. There was a woman sitting on a donkey and she fell down, we never knew what happened to her; nobody waited for her. Then we went to Greece by boat. (Interview 134-SWE)*

*It was a very difficult journey. We were walking and it was difficult because the Turkish army was shooting. They were shooting at us while we were walking. There were bullets passing by over our heads and between our legs. There was a risk not to get through. (Interview 34-GR; see also Interview 32-GR)*

Another interlocutor remembered on being asked if his journey from Afghanistan to Austria was dangerous: "Yes, only once at the border to Turkey. There we walked across the mountains and the Turkish police shot at us: one, two persons got injured; one of them I know

well, they have a bullet right here. Crossing the borders illegally is dangerous” (Interview 5-AUT). Another respondent who also experienced shootings during his attempts to cross the border understood that this was a preventative action rather than actually intended to target migrants per se: “We heard the sound of shooting, but not at us. Probably random, or to scare us” (Interview 98-LEB). Although it is not clear who the perpetrator was, it seems it was a strategy followed either by the army or by paramilitary groups and border militia as a means of intimidating the migrants into discontinuing their journey.

Besides shootings, which can be the most perilous use of violence against migrants, the latter were subjected to several further forms of physical and psychological abuse. Many respondents who made their journeys via the Balkan and Central Mediterranean routes reported being mistreated by the police, the coastguard, border officials, and/or the military, sometimes in such a brutal and systematic way as to resemble torture—as described earlier vis-à-vis the situation in Libyan prison camps. But this form of direct, interpersonal violence was also experienced by fleeing migrants within Europe too.

In contrast to the shootings taking place on the Iranian-Turkish or Syrian-Turkish borders, respondents reported different forms of physical violence occurring on intra-European borders—including beatings, pushbacks, deliberate exposure to inhumane conditions (extreme cold or heat), or appalling conditions in detention centers. Several informants stated that the police were far more violent in the countries situated in between Greece and Austria, as this description aptly points out: “In general, Eastern Europe police are more violent. I saw cases of beatings and violence in front of me. There was so much violence against refugees after Greece. Like in Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia. In Austria, the situation changed a bit.” (Interview 116-SWE)

We have several reports in our material pointing out that many were intimidated, threatened, some even beaten by the Greek police while trying to land on the Aegean islands:

*Soldiers received us, they took everything from us, mobiles, they took everything, they just left cigarettes and gave us water to drink. There was a barn for sheep; they let the sheep go, and tied us up instead.* (Interview 128-SWE)

Another interview sequence proceeded as follows:

*Respondents: They have something in their hands, and they hit you on the legs.*

*Interviewer: What was the reason?*

*Respondents: Because they come here. They send back all who come using their boats. But we slit the boat with knives. They [probably smugglers] told us if we do so, they won't send us back. But they [the police] saw us, so they punished us.*

*Interviewer: How many people?*

*Respondents: I do not remember. We stayed until the next day sitting on the ground. Our legs were hurting and when we stood up, they came to hit us.*

*Interviewer: And what happened after that?*

*Respondents: We stayed there for two days, then they sent us using a yacht to another island. We stayed in a police station. Outside. It was cold and we had only our clothes.*

*Interviewer: How many days?*

*A day.* (Interview 129-SWE)

Many recollected similar situations in Macedonia, as this particular migrant did: “Those who tried to cross the Greek-Macedonian border were arrested and beaten by the border guards”



(Interview 125-SWE). Another shared that: “In Macedonia, they were very aggressive, they were pushing, and they were beating people, we stayed one night in Macedonia” (Interview 131-SWE). The mistreatment and beatings were sometimes also life-threatening:

*Yes, in Macedonia. One of our relatives was with us and he was beaten by the Macedonian police when trying to cross the border. He was taken to the hospital, and the doctor said that he might need a serious surgery on his head. We did not know what to do in that situation: ‘Shall we leave him and continue our trip before the borders close or should we wait for him?’ (Interview 145-GER)*

Another hot spot of police violence, as already indicated earlier, was Hungary:

*In Hungary we had a lot of problems, police were beating people and we were in jail for fifteen days. We had to give our fingerprints. We were treated very badly by the police. They gave us a little biscuit, but they were throwing it to us like animals. It was difficult for us to take it because there were so many people, so we ended up eating very little. The verbal abuse is worse than the normal violence. You can heal from a hit, but a bad word would really hurt. Then they made us sit in the sun even though there were many trees. The temperature was 50 degrees Celsius and they did not care about the children. Women started to cry. Then a British group asked to interview us. Because of that they let us sit in the shade. After that a car came with water. Not cold, but hot water with bread. Then they sent us to a camp, it was like rubbish. Full of diseases. (Interview 117-SWE)*

#### **4.1.2. Violence by civilians: Smugglers, locals, gangs**

Smugglers have been reported as being another source of violence, some by using guns during the journey—which became more explicit at certain crucial points in time: “The smugglers are not very kind; they started shouting and pushing us around. No one dares to say anything because they are holding weapons” (Interview 98-LEB). Smugglers would become violent when migrants challenged their strategies for the journey or refused to continue to the next step if it seemed extremely dangerous. The latter could be related to the nature of the crossing (such as mountain paths) or occur when the smugglers did not uphold their promises, making an already dangerous journey a life-threatening one. The most salient example is the overfilled boats for the crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands, or from Libya to Italy. Migrants were threatened with being shot if they refused to board the overcrowded boats, as this interviewee recalled: “We gathered in a place called ‘The Point.’ It was in the middle of nowhere. They were ready to kill you if you do not ride the boat. We were fifty-three in the boat” (Interview 121-SWE). Another told how: “We were pushed by smugglers who showed their guns and told us we had to go by water, but twelve people went but never came back, they died. So three times we tried, but after that we decided to wait, because the boats were very old and the machines were old” (Interview 137-SWE).

Due to the nature of the routes most of our respondents had to take migrants were exposed to additional forms of direct, interpersonal violence such as being robbed by thieves along the way. A very illustrative account from an Afghan interviewee shows how the thieves ambushed the migrants in order to steal their possessions:

*One night it was very dark, we heard some people coming with guns or pistols, I can't remember because it was dark, and they were beating people and telling us to give up everything we had. They even put their hands inside women's bras to see if we*

*were hiding money or gold. They were thieves. They took all of our things.* (Interview 133-SWE)

Respondents also mentioned that they felt threatened by the local population on occasion. One individual reported that in a certain Bulgarian village a resident sent their dog to attack them: *“One of them sent a dog to bite us”* (Interview 117-SWE). Or, locals resorted to verbal abuse: *“The residents there started to curse us; the Hungarian police came and we were arrested”* (Interview 128-SWE). Others reported that in Hungarian villages locals called the police as soon as they noticed migrants walking by. Few also recounted violent interactions between different refugee groups in camps or detention centers that they were forced to stay in.

#### **4.1.3. Nonhuman sources of violence: Border technologies, nature**

Furthermore, border infrastructures were another nonhuman source of violence against migrants. The most common means of preventing trespassing was the use of high, barbed-wired, and/or electric fences, such as experienced by interviewees along the Syrian-Turkish and the Serbian-Hungarian borders. Some reported that in their efforts to cross this infrastructure of deterrence they were badly injured (see also, Interview 146-GER). Another interlocutor recounted: *“I don’t know, but Turkey for me is so bad. [...] We crossed the metallic wires [at the border fence] walking, I will never forget that trip until I die. Four months after our arrival in Germany, our hands were still injured.”* (Interview 141-GER) Along the Balkan route it was the Hungarian fence built during the autumn months of 2015 that was one of the most decisive technological border obstacles: *“There were electric wires, and while we were cutting I held onto an electric wire and got electrocuted. It was a minor sting and I dropped it; we kept cutting, until we arrived in a forest in Hungary”* (Interview 128-SWE). Another shared how:

*As I came walking, we were a group, the obstacle that made us sleep two days at the border is the Serbian-Hungarian border. We slept two days along the border to be able to pass through the barbed wire, to climb over it, and its upper part was razorblade barbed wire, and all the group got hurt. One of my friends, a physician, Maher Seifo, Maher Seifo got cut [from here to there] and he had a surgery in Austria; I’m the only one who didn’t get hurt. The only one, because I drifted apart from them and I passed through another area where the wires didn’t swing, and there I climbed. But two days trying to pass and planes were overhead, and cars were at the borders by the fence. When the people flooded the fence, it exploded, fell over from the sudden movement, I was in a safer area nearby a post, the vibration was less, so I was the only one who didn’t get hurt, that was the biggest obstacle.* (Interview 118-SWE)

But not only technologies and infrastructures like fences and barbed wire were experienced as a form of border violence. For those who were forced to travel on the ground and who due to tightened border controls had to take longer routes and clandestine ways, as indeed most of our interviewees had to do, the topographical conditions of the borderscapes such as the sea, the desert, or the mountains were also hostile and life-threatening obstacles. As this Iranian refugee put it:

*There are also physical obstacles. The border between Iran and Turkey is very dangerous in this respect. I have got to know that there are many accidents happening there. Some have been shot. We had a really hilly route, and I fell right in front of the*

*borderline to Turkey and couldn't walk on. This is a physical hinderance.* (Interview 56-GER)

Many migrants who crossed the Iranian-Turkish, the Syrian-Turkish, the Syrian-Lebanese borders, as well as most who came via the Balkan route referred in their interviews to these physical obstacles as especially challenging for more vulnerable groups. As this Syrian refugee who crossed to Lebanon expressed it: “We start climbing the mountain to get to the other side. However, there are children and there are women and seniors, so I try as much as possible to help them but at the same time you have to keep up with the rest” (Interview 97-LEB). Another interlocutor who made the journey from Syria to Turkey remembered:

*Traveling was so hard: I mean, my wife was seven months pregnant. And we walked eleven hours between the mountains. And I am carrying one [child] and my wife was carrying one [child] and pregnant. I swear we walked for eleven hours, till we finally arrived [in Turkey].* (Interview 21-TUR)

Thereby the desert and the mountains were experienced as physically very hard and demanding (also regarding the living conditions) and threatening in respect of an accident. Signs of despair and sometimes even death could be found along the routes: “It was February, and it was cold at the borders, close to the borders and the rivers. We have seen people who froze to death. We saw a skeleton and a human head” (Interview 41-GR). Additionally, as shown in the previous section, these topographic conditions exposed migrants to several forms of interpersonal violence. The maritime borders were certainly the most existentially life-threatening and deadly ones, as outlined in the two previous sections on the Balkan and the Central Mediterranean routes.

## 4.2. Pushbacks and detention

Numerous reports point to the fact that pushbacks—meaning enforced returns of refugees and migrants “back over a border – generally immediately after they crossed it – without consideration of their individual circumstances and without any possibility to apply for asylum or to put forward arguments against the measures taken” (ECCHR 2020)—have been massively increasing within the EU’s territory since 2015. Our interview material, which covers mainly flight biographies up until 2016, also includes several accounts of pushbacks to neighboring countries. These pushbacks were practiced either by the police or other authorities; the risk of being pushed back was not only a daily experience on African routes, but was seemingly also systematically practiced by Lebanon, Macedonia, and Turkey. These pushbacks were mostly realized by resorting to physical violence. Some interviewees experienced pushback to the previous transit country or to their one of origin a number of times.

After Turkey more or less shut its border to Syria in 2015, partly with the help of a three-meter high “security wall” and barbed-wire fence, some interviewees also reported situations of detention and being pushed back without the possibility to claim protection. As this woman recounted<sup>23</sup>:

<sup>23</sup> Another reported: “First the police [the Turkish Gendarmerie] caught us and put us in prison. Then they let us go, but they kept the men in the prison for twenty-four hours or more out in the sun in order to teach them to not repeat the trip again, but we repeated it again! The second time we left at night about 9pm. We arrived about 4:30am in the morning. At that time, there were some bruises on me

*When I arrived in Antakya [inside Turkey] they caught us and threw us back across the border again. They didn't only throw us, they put us in prison for three days! So after we felt that we are finally there, they returned us. In the prison, my children didn't drink water for three days! It was very, very hard on us. They put us in big bus and put us in a prison [an old building] for three days, and there it was hard too. One time a woman told them 'I want to go to the bathroom,' and they told her to do it where she was! This happened inside Turkey, at the border. After that, they sent us away to the Bab al-Hawa gate and told us to go back to Syria. Then we tried again and again, we tried seven times before we successfully came in! (Interview 105-TUR)*

After Turkish troops occupied parts of Syria surrounding Idlib, a Syrian migrant even reported being intercepted by the Turkish army within Syria:

*We would run, they would catch us, we'd be detained for a couple of nights. I was arrested in Kherbet Eljoz, in Idlib, I crossed, and it turned out to be a military zone, they took me, and I was detained for two nights. The Turkish army. They arrested us and brought us out in the sun for forty-eight hours. Then they deported us to Syria, they took us back. Not only me but all the women, and the people, something like 500 people. They took us back to Syria. And then I went back and stayed for something like ten days. (Interview 22-TUR)*

A Yezidi woman remembered:

*We tried many times with boat, but failed. The boat ahead of us sank, and many refugees died in that incident. In the end, we tried with a plane with fake passports. We left my husband behind, but I was caught and imprisoned for twenty-five days. My husband paid a lot of money to release me. I was along with fifty-two other people returned back to Syria. [...] It [the treatment] was so bad, we were treated like animals. They were handcuffing us like terrorists. They released us at Bab al-Hawa border gate between Syria and Turkey. We could see ISIS militants from there. They dropped us there and told us to go and let Al-Assad deal with you. We were afraid to go into Syria, so we returned back through the mountains. There we saw a shepherd who guided us by taking 150 euros from each person until we reached Antakya, and then to Istanbul again. (Interview 26-UK)*

Pushbacks were also reported by Syrian migrants on trying to enter Lebanon:

*I myself tried to travel illegally, several times, but it never worked out and I would always get sent back. I was told about a guy in Tripoli who can send people away. I got in contact with him but he's a scammer. There's no travel. I was stopped once because of my documents. (Interview 100-LEB)*

Pushbacks were also reported within the inner-European space in the period up to 2016. Most respondents experiencing pushbacks here did so specifically at the Macedonian border:

*I was caught by the Macedonian police and pushed back to Greece. I was also caught by the Serbian police and stayed in prison for two days, but could continue to Hungary. (Interview 44-HUN)*

because the road was so hard. We crossed about three rivers, climbed mountains, had to go through valleys. It was a smuggling route" (Interview 107-TUR).

*However, in Macedonia, the police found us and returned us to Greece three times, but they treated us well. After that we decided to change the route through Albania and Montenegro. In Montenegro, the police opened fire on us, but no one got hit, and then we continued to Serbia. (Interview 119-SWE)*

Administrative detention (not with the aim of deportation) was also a part of the journey for some of the interviewees, with 6 percent reporting that they were arrested at the border and 5 percent that they were detained. The length of detention ranged from a few hours to several months. The use of violence by the authorities prior to migrants' detention was not uncommon. While interviewees relayed having been arrested, imprisoned, and detained by a number of different countries along their routes,<sup>24</sup> the collected primary material identifies Hungary, Libya, and the UK as the three countries where arrest and detention seemed to be systematic practices—that for several reasons. Whereas our interview material on Libya often connects imprisonment there with some kind of forced labor (Interview 58-, 59-, 60-, 61-, 62-, 69-, 70-, 71-, 77-, 81-ITA), the quotes regarding Hungary rather relate arrest and detention to deterrence and EURODAC fingerprint registration. In the UK, meanwhile, detention was part of the asylum procedure.

In all cases imprisonment and detention went mostly hand in hand with humiliating treatment, the refusal of necessary medical treatment (Hungary and Libya), and poor nutrition—as several quotes so far have already indicated. One Syrian woman put it like this:

*When we arrived in Hungary the police took us to a prison and obliged us to give fingerprints. We were put in a huge room by the Hungarian police. We felt like in a zoo, and we are the kept animals. It was very humiliating. (Interview 145-GER)*

Another remembered:

*Our hard time was with the Hungarian police. They were treating us in a very inhuman way. At one point they arrested a huge group of us and started to put every five families in a cell in a prison. The situation was really bad. The food was bad [...]. One of the girls with us suffered from epilepsy in the cell, but no one cared about her. The Hungarian police were mean. After they released us from the cells, they made us sign a paper. We did not understand what is written on it. So, we wrote in Arabic next to our signatures: 'This was signed by force and intimidation. (Interview 147-GER)*

The situation in the UK did not seem to be much better, as a number of reports describe. Here asylum-seeking migrants were detained for between a few days up to several months after they had handed in their asylum application (see also, Interview 169-UK). Most interviewees stated that they did not have any information on why they had been arrested or for how long:

*I have endured many sufferings on the way, in Iran suffered quite a lot, why should I be in prison here [in the UK], I thought? And no one would explain to me why I was there. Some friends told me that I shouldn't worry much, since something like six to seven nights I would probably stay in prison. Then I would ask the prison officers about my length of stay there and they would say: 'We don't know, it could be all your life.' I also didn't have access to my medication over there, since I take medication for my heart and blood pressure, they treated us quite badly.*

<sup>24</sup> One person was arrested and imprisoned for three months together with normal criminals in Greece for illegally crossing the border, albeit with a trial (Interview 154-GER).

He ended his description of his eight days in Dungbell Prison as follows:

*There were people who had stayed there six months, four months, ten months, they looked like zombies really and there was no one to help them. So, the person had made a mistake, for example had passed the gate holding his own passport, so he had to stay in prison for six months then. So, they didn't treat us like they should do.* (Interview 168-UK)

Another asylum seeker who was detained for two months in the UK remembered this time also as highly traumatizing, mostly due to the uncertainty surrounding what will happen to him eventually:

*You don't know anything, because you don't know what's going on. I didn't know where am I on this planet. I didn't know, because I was just moved from police station, prison, to another prison called 'detention center,' and I didn't know what to do, I'm just waiting there [...] it's uncertainty. You don't know what's going on after that. Will they send me back to my terrible country? Will they leave me here for months, years? Or what's going to happen? And just worrying, stress, trauma. So, yeah. Sometimes indescribable, and you only think, 'I only hope, I hope I will leave this room.' You become smaller and smaller and smaller.* (Interview 169-UK)

Several respondents who came via plane also reported being arrested and detained at the airports they passed through for several hours up to a number of days, mostly to check the passport and travel documents for their authenticity (Interview 53-GER). Some were also arrested for passport fraud at the gate to the plane or at Passport Control and later sent to prison (Interview 50-GER).

### **4.3. Internal controls, legal insecurity, deportability**

The legal status of migrants is directly related to the possibility of being detained or deported, producing a highly insecure situation that Nicholas de Genova has coined "deportability" (2010). Several informants mentioned that they were living in such precarious and insecure conditions because of their undocumented and irregular status, either because they entered a country undocumented or because their visa had expired. This refers mostly to transit countries where migrants remained stranded for a long period of time, eventually turning into a semi-permanent place of residence. Lebanon, Turkey, but also Egypt, Jordan, and Libya are the most salient examples. In these cases, a cycle of "arrest–detention–release" became routine, a part of the everyday life of many migrants.

The kafala sponsorship system in Lebanon to obtain semi-regularized residence and permission to work installed in 2015 by that country is an example of a state policy that worsens the living conditions of refugees, and which leads to a highly precarious state of repeating phases of clandestine activity eventually followed by detention. As this migrant put it: "I never experienced detention thankfully, but it is always a risk because we have not renewed our residencies" (Interview 99-LEB). Another interlocutor expressed it like this:

*Not to mention what the process of the kafala has created, more loopholes exploiting situations. This is something known, everyone has done it, and its known that there is no work and no employment, and the sponsorship is very expensive. They know and they don't care, they still detain us for it.* (Interview 92-LEB).

Even if most migrants in Lebanon know that they will not get deported in the end, the system not only produces a high level of precariousness but also restricts freedom of movement. As this respondent noted: “[If you have overstayed your permit] they will detain you for three or four days, and then they will remove you. Of course, we cannot move around the way we want” (Interview 93-LEB). But not only their legal status restricts the mobility of migrants and produces highly precarious living and work conditions; rather, the generally politically unstable and insecure situations that exist in many transit countries like Egypt, Lebanon, and Libya—and lately also Turkey since the failed coup d’état of 2016—have severe repercussions for non-nationals. Many respondents in Lebanon thus mentioned especially the checkpoints everywhere as highly restrictive of their freedom of movement: “I have not left the area for three years because there are checkpoints everywhere” (Interview 95-LEB).

There is also an economic dimension to such highly precarious legal and social living conditions and the constant risk of being detained, namely corruption and a culture of bribery. So, some respondents reported that they had to pay huge amounts of money in order to obtain their own release or that of relatives. One Syrian woman remembered: “We tried with a plane with fake passports. We left my husband behind, but I was caught and imprisoned for twenty-five days [in Turkey]. My husband paid a lot of money to release me. I was along with fifty-two other people returned back to Syria” (Interview 166-UK). Interlocutors also reported that in Libya they could free themselves by paying a lot of money either to smugglers or traffickers who were trying to exploit cheap labor from among migrants imprisoned in camps, or directly to get free and continue on their way.



## 5. Knowledge, Information, Planning

The level of information migrants had as well as the intensity of planning and preparation differed significantly between respondents. There were interviewees who stated that they left rather spontaneously and had only marginal knowledge about the route and hardly any plan where to go to; others described, meanwhile, how they had prepared their flight for several months in detail. As we have shown so far, there are also many refugee migrants who did their journey step-by-step—and, in that sense, also collected information rather bit by bit and in situ. Thereby the penetrability (or rather the closure) of the borders was a decisive factor defining the level and the composition of information needed, the possible route, ways of crossing the respective borders, as well as possible countries to reach and stay in. In this respect we have shown that the majority of our respondents did not have a visa and mostly traveled on the ground, meaning that they often had to turn to smugglers.

However, respondents were not only concerned with the how of the journey but also with the where to. In this regard, not only the living conditions and the legal situation counted but so did educational and labor-market possibilities too—with some attempting to find out information thereon beforehand given their particular qualifications. Some interlocutors recounted the very difficult and complex processes of weighing up pros and cons between different possible final destinations.

Four main different types of information and knowledge sources were mentioned: first and foremost, from relatives, friends, acquaintances, and compatriots who had already traveled to or lived in Europe and elsewhere. However, some of this information is quite vague, and more hearsay and rumor. Nevertheless, these personal sources were the most frequently mentioned pool of information to the interviewees who decided to migrate later. As second important source smugglers were mentioned by our interlocutors—with many respondents noting the risk of intentionally spread misinformation. Third, the media—especially social media and the Internet—were an additional important source of information in respect of the practicalities and possible dangers of the trip, but also regarding how to get in touch with smugglers. Fourth and finally, another important way in which migrants acquired knowledge on possible routes and destination countries was in situ. The time spent in a transit country acted in this respect also as a chance to accumulate information on the next phase of the trip. Fellow migrants met *en route*, in camps, or in detention facilities were another in-situ source.

### 5.1. Planned and unplanned journeys, and the choice of destination

The way migrants planned—or rather could plan—their exit from the country they wanted/had to leave was seemingly linked to a variety of factors and processes: political, social, financial/economic circumstances in the country that they wanted to leave as well as concerning their own family and networks (regarding both problems faced as well as resources available); the condition and availability of certain flight options, routes, and support structures (smugglers, networks of relatives, friends, or compatriots, diasporas, etc.). Thereby, making an “unplanned” departure did not mean that the actors involved did not have any prior knowledge or information on how to go about it and where to go to. Additionally, the experiences of our respondents also show that unplanned exits might ultimately lead to the same outcome as the well-organized ones, with the whole endeavor being characterized by acute uncertainty and unpredictability.



### 5.1.1. Unplanned

Some interviewees—mainly from war-torn countries such as Afghanistan or Syria, from ones with a high rate of persecution of political activists such as Iran (and later Turkey), but also from different African countries (Interview 58-, 59-, 60-, 61-, 62-, 63-, 64-, 65-, 66-, 67-, 68-, 69-, 70-, 71-, 72-, 73-, 74-, 75-, 78-, 79-, 80-, 81-ITA) —stated that they had spontaneously decided to leave without any prior planning at all. Some referred to recent war-related developments and direct personal threats by the military, police, or gangs; others all of a sudden had the opportunity to leave. Their only aim was to “run away as fast as possible” (Interview 10-AUT). As this Afghan migrant who arrived in Austria in 2015 recalled:

*I got a call at 1am at night from my father; I was together with my brother who was seriously injured. My father said: ‘Tomorrow you have to leave with your brother.’ I asked him why, but he didn’t say much, he only said that I have to talk with my brother and leave with him. (Interview 5-AUT)*

One Syrian family literally left for Turkey overnight meanwhile, as the war suddenly moved closer to their home city:

*I remember we left our place to visit my grandparents to have iftar with them because it was Ramadan. We were supposed to stay at their place only for one night. We left everything at the apartment as if we are returning the next day [...] but we did not return until now. During the night the bombing started in our city. My parents were also scared that my brother will be taken to the army. So, we decided to leave for Turkey. (Interview 160-GER)*

Another interlocutor stated: “We decided suddenly to leave Syria. It took us only five minutes to leave” (Interview 158-GER). A refugee from Iran described his own departure similarly: “I had known nothing, not where to go. I just knew that I should run away because of the thing that happened in Iran. But not where to go. I only had to go” (Interview 4-AUT). An Afghan migrant reported a quite similar situation when leaving with their whole family:

*We didn’t have any concrete information. We only heard from friends that they did the journey and reached there. This means we didn’t have any information on the situation of the borders. We also had no concrete plan where to go. We considered to go to Austria, Germany, or Sweden. Didn’t matter which of these countries. We only wanted to run away. (Interview 16-AUT; see also, Interview 45-HUN and Interview 46-HUN; all from Afghanistan)<sup>25</sup>*

Rapid departures in the course of a direct threat also led to the separation of families. Frequently the person under severe threat left the country alone, with the family coming later in a more prepared and safer way—for example by family reunification (Interview 6-AUT). These kinds of departures also meant that often the persons did not have the time to pack, leaving as they were. As this Syrian interviewee who left for Lebanon remembered: “The journey to get to the borders took days, we had nothing with us. We just left only with our clothes” (Interview 83-LEB).

Many refugee migrants from African countries also stated that their departure and journey was not planned. Here the departure seemed to happen rather in relation to opportunity structures, as this migrant from Gambia relayed:

<sup>25</sup> “My only target was to run away, I didn’t think about where” (Interview 46-HUN).

*Honestly, it wasn't planned. It wasn't really planned. I was just playing a football game, there, in the second division, and I just came home, my brother had told me, come on, I got my [mum's?] money, so let's just do something and then go. For me, life was really hard for me with my stepmum, you know, someone who didn't care, so I just told him, 'Yeah of course, then, why not?' So, I just left my football material there, and we just left during the night. But it wasn't really planned. (Interview 31-GER)*

Another respondent also from Gambia put it like this: "It wasn't planned for a long time. I just woke up one day, took the bus from Gambia to Senegal, and so I took the journey" (Interview 57-ITA). Another individual just said: "No plans, there were some problems in Nigeria, and I left" (Interview 66-ITA).

### **5.1.2. With a plan**

Some informants tried to prepare their trip very well in advance, not only in respect of the route but also possible destinations and the living conditions and career opportunities there. An essential category of information and travel planning was related to the possible dangers and threats of the journey, with some respondents trying to find out as much information as possible before departure. As this Iranian refugee remembered:

*One week we considered which route to take. My father collected reports of all the people who had fled before and he found out which routes have been taken and which one is the most comfortable one. All these routes have their own difficulties. But he had checked which way was less dangerous and on which route the people had less problems. And he got in contact with all these people and tried to get informed on the route. (Interview 9-AUT)*

But the interviewee also stated that some aspects of this information were somehow over exaggerated, and did not befall them. Another Iranian migrant remembered that it took them two to three months to prepare their flight, nevertheless in his mind "everything went so fast" (Interview 55-GER). There were several interviewees who reported that they also tried to be well equipped. Especially the dangers of the sea crossings were common knowledge, with some buying life jackets and communication technologies such as satellite telephones in advance so as to be able to make contact in case of emergency. As these interviewees recounted: "We bought life jackets because we had taken into account that we might drown" (Interview 126-SWE); "We wanted to call the coastguard, and one person had a Thuraya satellite communication phone. We called them and they told us to wait about two hours for a Russian oil tanker" (Interview 126-SWE).

Yet, even a very well-organized trip did not necessarily bring the expected results. The lives of interviewees were still at risk during the flight, or they would even with pre-planning ultimately find themselves stranded in transit countries for a long period of time before they could eventually reach their initially intended destination.

## **5.2. The choice of destination**

The choice of destination was, again, on the one hand related to the time period of the journey and on the other to the availability of information on the target country. Herein respondents were interested in information on the legal situation, on access to residence permits and eventually citizenship, on educational prospects, as well as on the general quality of life. For many it was a complex assessment, and involved a process of comparing different countries

and various integration-related factors. As this Syrian woman who ultimately made it to Germany stated:

*For me the first choices were Egypt, Jordan, and Malaysia. Egypt was an impossible choice for my father, because he lived there for a while and there was revolution, coup and stuff, so impossible. Jordan is too expensive, especially as my sister and I wanted to study. And Malaysia [...] we thought about it because everybody from my city went there. Life there is good, they speak English, it is a Muslim country. The universities were good, there were certain majors, but then we thought ok since we are traveling anyway and going far, Germany is better. (Interview 140-GER)*

Another Syrian woman recalled the decision-making process faced as a couple:

*My husband studied law in Syria, the idea was to go to a Francophone country since his degree is accredited over there. Me, as an architect, I can work in any country, but he as a lawyer he had to go to specific countries. The choice was Belgium, because in comparison between Belgium and France, the refugee conditions in Belgium are better. (Interview 139-GER)*

An interlocutor who eventually decided to go to the UK recalled it being a difficult process of weighing up pros and cons concerning integration-related factors such as language, family networks, job prospects:

*I was confused whether to go to Sweden where I had a lot of relatives or alternatively to the UK where my fiancée has her family, plus I speak good English. And dentistry is better in the UK than in Sweden, also work-wise. And in Sweden I would have to start from scratch, also with the language. (Interview 28-UK)*

Many especially mentioned that they wanted to go to Germany to continue their education, as this man did: “*I had many relatives already living in Germany, and I wanted to study there*” (Interview 158-GER). Another young man who was sent abroad by his parents to avoid military service put it like this:

*My dad told me that I should leave so I don't get into problems in the future when I go back to Aleppo. I had a high average and I could study architecture in Aleppo, but my dad told me that I don't need all the problems and that I have to leave to Germany. (Interview 155-GER)*

Besides these hard facts concerning the legal as well as the social situation, the choice of destination country was mostly dependent on where people had friends and relatives. Many Syrian migrants spoken with already had contacts abroad, especially in Turkey but also in European countries too:

*My brother was staying in a camp in another city [Germany], but my cousins had an apartment and they told us to come to them and stay at their place—better than staying in a camp. We stayed with them for one month and a half. My cousins told us about Friedland. We went there and gave ourselves up. (Interview 141-GER)*

Or as another migrant from Liberia recalled:

*I have a friend who lives in Frankfurt. So I contacted my friend and he told me to come to Germany. So he was looking on the Internet and was trying to decide which place in Germany is the best to apply for asylum. But that's all the information I had. Oh yeah, and I was also told that Germans are punctual, they work on time, and that they*

*have a good, strong bureaucracy. In fact, they are the champions in bureaucracy.*  
(Interview 102-GER)

Some even narrated it in a manner that resembled a form of persuasion:

*My husband was in Lebanon and we were awaiting our destiny [in Algeria]. He has his two brothers here in Germany, they came in 2015 and said to my husband: 'If you go to Germany, ask for asylum and maybe after this you will bring your wife and your family. Because you have no choice. You haven't another solution if you want to live with your family. If you go to Germany it is good now and they give asylum to Syrians and maybe you will bring your family and your wife and your two children [this one had been born in Algeria by that time] and you can bring them to Germany.* (Interview 2-GER)

Austria, Germany, and Sweden for example were framed by many interviewees as countries that meet these expectations, something reaffirmed by friends, relatives, or members of the diaspora who had migrated earlier. It seems that this kind of knowledge, which is the optimal choice regarding destination country, is disseminated in part from current to future migrants. Many interviewees described Sweden's and Germany's reputation of being attractive destinations as common knowledge. However, in some cases, interlocutors mentioned that they decided to diverge from their initial plan to reach a popular destination country in the north of Europe and resided instead in one of the countries of first arrival. One interviewee stated that despite initially aiming to reach the UK and apply there for asylum he decided that Greece is also a country where he could develop a sense of belonging. This was based on the feeling of safety in the country, and also in his attraction to Greece's culture and history:

*I think that I didn't know about Europe which country is good. I don't know which one is good. But when I reached here to Greece, then I realized that I can do something here. I can understand the Greek culture, and then I knew about these people and I went to visit Kos. Then I said that these people have a big history from many years ago. [...] That is the decision that I did by my own self. Now there is no need to go to London because I don't have any cousins, any relatives, in Germany or in London, why I should go there? I feel safe here. I can do something here. And now I am [...].*  
(Interview 39-GR)

The aforementioned quote challenges the dominant perception and discourse regarding the categorization of certain countries as ones of transit and destination. In some cases, the extra time spent in a transit country due to the inability to continue the journey (because of closed borders and the like) eventually renders the transit space a permanent one. Time familiarizes the individual with the place in which they reside, creating a sense of belonging and leading to the anticipation of integration. As this informant said of Greece:

*I came to Greece and the borders closed. And then, bit by bit, little by little, I started liking Greece. Because people are not bad. They are good. And then I have started slowly learning Greek.* (Interview 37-GR)

However, not only Europe was considered by some informants as the ultimate destination. Many migrants also chose neighboring countries like Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey as their first option in seeking refuge. As detailed earlier, these states were geographically close and mostly just demanded the crossing of a single border—traditionally a rather porous one, with long-standing cross-border trade, networks, and communities. This made arrival and

finding assistance easier, as demonstrated above for the case of Turkey. But there were also those who reported that their final destination was not the result of a conscious choice or the outcome of a free decision-making process, rather being the result of the smuggling process:

*It was not a conscious choice that I came to England; you just follow the smugglers and they control you. They will suggest to bring you to a country that is safe and you just say ok. (Interview 29-UK)*

### 5.3. Step-by-step: Fragmented and interrupted journeys

Whether with or without a clear plan, many respondents first turned, as noted, to a neighboring country. Here they stayed for a while, some also with the intention to reside there until the reason why they had left home in the first place (like the war in Syria) had passed. As this Syrian woman expressed it:

*In the beginning we wanted to leave to Turkey, and it was a problem for us because we were living in the part of Aleppo which was under the control of the Syrian regime. It was a problem especially for my husband. At some point they opened one passageway briefly for money and my husband made it to Turkey. In the beginning the plan was that only my husband leaves, but then my sister wanted to leave so we decided also to leave. My husband was getting all the information from his friend who had so many connections. But you know, you don't get information from a specific person. You decide to leave and then you see how it goes step-by-step. Things will be facilitated during the trip. (Interview 146-GER)*

Another Syrian refugee who was interviewed in Germany remembered his initial trajectory as follows:

*I did not collect information about the road. The idea was to get to Turkey. I had former neighbors who moved there after the war, and I wanted to stay with them. I wanted to work with them or work in a hair salon. I thought of going to Turkey to see how life is there, and then to see if I travel or not. (Interview 153-GER)*

But quite often, as already demonstrated, the living conditions or political situation in neighboring states like Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey or others categorized as “transit countries” made living there as a refugee migrant more and more difficult, with interviewees thus deciding to continue their journey. Sometimes also the original threat was not left behind at the border, manifesting in the transit country too. This was the case for one Syrian refugee who stayed for some time in Turkey but was eventually threatened there by “*Daesh as well.*” He recalled the situation when he planned to leave again: “I had no information. I just knew that I had to cross the sea with a rubber boat. But on the route, there were many organizations that showed us the way” (Interview 13-AUT).

These step-by-step movements, or “fragmented journeys” as Michael Collyer (2010) has named them, produced protracted migration and flight situations sometimes over ten years long—as our material indicates as well. Thereby the notion of “transit country” can be misleading, as they rather turn into places of “permanent temporariness” (Hess 2010)—quite often with the highly precarious legal codification of this kind of settlement. This is the case in Turkey for example with its aforementioned TP status for Syrians and in Lebanon with the kafala system (see also, national reports by Rahme 2020 on Lebanon and Gökalp Aras and Sahin Mencütek 2020 on Turkey).

Many became stranded or remained in countries that they had not envisioned and planned to, some did so as a result of their own decision-making, while others were forced to interrupt the journey onward elsewhere. As this Syrian woman stated: “We arrived at the end of 2014. The plan was not to come to Germany. But we ended up here” (Interview 139-GER). The Balkan route made a step-by-step approach possible, and facilitated ultimately rather unexpected and spontaneous decision-making—as the material from the Austrian RESPOND team shows. Many of their respondents answered the question of why they had come specifically to Austria in a similar way to how this particular migrant did: “The journey was so long that I got to know on the way that Austria is the first country in Europe that is safe” (Interview 4-AUT). For many, Austria was the first country after the long journey, with all its challenges, where they felt that they could take a “breather.” Even if they had planned to reach Germany, Sweden, or another Northern European country, they spontaneously decided to stay there as they felt for the first time somehow “safe.” As the flight-journey was so exhausting and some of them were ill and injured they had no desire to continue, and so changed their plans somewhat and decided to stay put (Interview 3-AUT).

On the other hand, for many it was not out of free will that they ended up residing where they did; rather they were forced by national or EU border- and migration-control policies to halt their journey and stay where they were. This happened when they had been intercepted and brought to a camp or detention facility, as in Hungary—especially after it criminalized all transit movements from 2016 onward. The Dublin Regulation was another reason why many journeys were interrupted, and migrants had to stay in countries they never wished to. As this woman recalled:

*We were planning to come and stay in Austria, because my dad had family members there, but we ended up in Germany because of the fingerprints. In Austria, my father met an Egyptian lawyer living there and he told us that the only way to ‘break’ the fingerprints in Hungary is to leave to Germany. Germany had that law. So, we continued to Germany. (Interview 145-GER)*

Many had to end their journeys due to EURODAC and the Dublin Regulation, falling short of their planned destinations as they had been registered and fingerprinted in an EU country before. Among our informants, 20 percent stated that their fingerprints had been logged, while 38 percent said that no such registration took place. One interviewee stated that the fingerprint documentation hindered him from reaching his destination country: “*Actually, I wanted to go instead to Sweden because I had friends there and I thought it would be better for me to go to a place where I knew people already. But I got fingerprinted in Germany*” (Interview 150-GER; see also, Interview 151-GER). National-distribution schemes like the one in Germany also led to asylum-seeking migrants ending up in places they never wished to and to which they had no connection (Interview 152-GER).

## **5.4. Sources of information**

### **5.4.1. Role of personal and diasporic networks**

As said, interpersonal information was the most mentioned source thereof. Especially other migrants who had already gone through the process of traveling to the transit and destination countries were a valuable pool of knowledge for later outbounds to Europe. Among such individuals are relatives, personal acquaintances, as well as diasporic national, ethnic, or

religious communities who act as the most direct form of access to experience and information. As this Syrian woman explained:

*We were asking the people about everything. Everyone we knew. Most people. We had a lot of relatives and neighbors who left before us. Also, friends who were with us at school. Everyone who wrote [on Facebook] that they had arrived in Germany or to another European country. Even if we did not have contact before, we were talking about the trip and its circumstances. They were telling us to come here because its better. And it is true. (Interview 141-GER)*

Another remarked: “My dad got all the information from his friends who left Syria before us, and also from his relatives” (Interview 145-GER). Due to certain national histories of outmigration having fostered robust diasporic networks and transnational connectivities, some respondents would recount having well-established contacts in different European countries:

*I have relatives living in Germany for twenty years. We called them, and with one phone call they told us to come here because everything is good, and that I will have a great future. I just walked with the people taking the trip, and to be honest with you the trip was enjoyable. It was like a touristic trip. (Interview 158-GER, see also, Interview 160-GER; Interview 161-GER)*

However, especially during 2015 and the peak days of the Balkan route there were so many people on the move that individual networks were no longer necessary to obtain relevant information and know-how. This kind of collective exodus produced its own opportunity structures, and a certain autonomy from traditional economies and border-regime infrastructures. Many respondents mentioned just following co-travelers and copying their strategies. As these respondents recalled: “For information, I was asking my friends and I was following the huge amount of people” (Interview 152-GER). Two other respondents remembered: “We went with the bus to the Macedonian border. Because everyone was doing that. We were just following the others” (Interview 165-UK); “There were a lot of other people, we were looking at them and we did the same thing that they did, we got help off the local people and migrants who were taking the same journey. From Greece, everybody was just copying each other” (Interview 135-SWE).

A Cameroonian migrant who had stayed for some time in Turkey also just followed the exodus in 2015, directly starting out in a group:

*I decided simply to follow the people. I knew many people who had gone to Europe, from Turkey to Germany, and continued. So, I took some time to collect all the information. I found a group of people who also wanted to travel to Germany. So, we went from Istanbul to Izmir. (Interview 24-UK)*

Due to the border regimes they had to deal with, for many migrants, as noted, the use of smugglers became necessary. How exactly to contact people who could assist in that regard was information shared again among the networks of relatives and acquaintances who had made the journey before already. Such information was more or less an open secret within local communities, especially in certain transit hubs like Istanbul. As a Syrian migrant who stayed there while accumulating information on which smuggling offers he could trust put it:

*I was staying at the home of a friend who lives in Istanbul. I had a period of time waiting to gather accurate information about the people who could help me in the*



*crossing. It was five attempts. The information I received was fairly accurate.*  
(Interview 125-SWE)

A Syrian female migrant recalled that they collected information already in her native country:

*In the beginning we were hearing about smugglers from people who left to Europe and their families who stayed in Syria. Then my husband got connected to one smuggler who told us about the pathway we needed to take, and we decided to go with him. We wanted to arrive in Germany. That was the goal.* (Interview 147-GER)

Some also mentioned that smugglers advertised their services on the Internet and came to the villages themselves to offer their assistance.

As mentioned, many refugee migrants interviewed by the RESPOND teams noted gathering information not only before their trip but also during its various stages. Each border had its own surveillance and control system, one changing with different time periods. Migrants would collect information in situ on how they could move, as this informant nicely described: “The people were telling each other about the procedure. When I arrived, I asked the Syrians in the camp about the procedure and when people arrived after me, I told them the same” (Interview 156-GER).

For example, several times interviewees referred to the practice of fingerprinting for the EURODAC database and in line with the Dublin Regulation. Many explicitly stated that they were informed about this procedure; in order to avoid being registered in a country other than the intended destination one, many furthermore tried to circumvent it too. One interviewee for example relayed that it was an interpreter in one of the transit countries who advised them to give false information to the national authorities:

*A translator for us, he was translating for our side, he told us a soldier will come to take our fingerprints and ask for personal information, and we should give the soldier wrong information and leave, so I gave them a fake name and fake information and they gave me a paper.*

#### **5.4.2. Smugglers as a source of knowledge and (mis)information**

One decisive factor not only for the ultimate outcome of the flight-journey but also for the kind of experiences that a refugee migrant would have in the different phases of travel was the role and agency of smugglers. The usefulness of smugglers seems to have been related to the specific trajectory of the journey in question, and to the migration policies of the transit and destination countries. Informants described them as the medium of transfer/mobility but also of information, with smugglers act as a source both of knowledge but also of misinformation. The smugglers were laconic about sharing information with the migrants regarding the trip, mostly only revealing just some of the actual difficulties and dangers to be encountered. Furthermore, relaying false facts and misinforming migrants about certain actions throughout the course of the trip seem to have been a common practice *in* the smuggling process. One interviewee was very explicit on the level of misinformation spread by smugglers:

*It was from the smugglers that we got information about the journey, but smugglers never tell the truth. They might say ‘Oh, you’ll only walk for two hours’ but you can walk for ten and still not be there. They lie a lot. But you don’t have another choice, you can’t come back, you just have to move on.* (Interview 131-SWE)



Another person recounted:

*The smugglers were giving us information all the time. We did not know anything before that. Everything they said was wrong. For example, they were saying that it is only 200 meters walk from Syria to Turkey. Before leaving Turkey to Germany, our group started to ask other people about smugglers, and someone told us that there is a very good smuggler in Izmir. He told us that the distance to be crossed is so short and that it is easy to cross the sea with a rubber boat. It was not. (Interview 143-GER)*

A characteristic example, one brought up by almost all interviewees who came via the Balkan and the Central Mediterranean routes, was to do with the number of people in the boat. Usually the actual number of travelers was many times higher than the one promised, and indeed much higher than the number that the boat was safely able to carry.

Even if many respondents would report such incidents of having been deceived and fooled by smugglers, they also expressed their belief however that they ultimately had “no choice” but to use such assistance. They understood that many smuggling networks were well informed about the control and surveillance routines of local and national authorities. This enabled them to adjust the route of the trip in order to avoid possible detention or pushback. Smugglers’ knowledge of the landscape and topography *en route* was also essential for bypassing the migration-control regimes of authorities.

#### **5.4.3. Social media and the Internet as a source of information**

An alternative and/or additional source of obtaining information about the journey, besides personal networks and direct communication with other individuals, was social media and the Internet. Many respondents recounted how they tried to gather data about the trip in general, and about more specific and technical aspects of it in particular. Much of this data was probably uploaded by people who had themselves previously experienced the journey, but also by diasporic or political networks as well as by smugglers advertising their services. Thereby Facebook and different chat groups of people who had already made the journey were the most frequent and vital sources of information (see also, Interview 8-AUT), as this Syrian migrant narrated:

*At the same time, there were many different opportunities, also on the Internet. I found a group called ‘Emigration to Europe’; it was for Syrian refugees around the world. It was a Facebook group. There you found a lot of information about each country, how many years you got in each country, how to get there, the different ways, to walk, by plane, all the rules [...] before leaving. We can call it an information bank. (Interview 25-UK)*

But only some of our respondents—mostly those originating from Syria—in fact really seem to have used this “information bank” on the Internet and different social media platforms. This one woman did as well<sup>26</sup>:

<sup>26</sup> There were couple of similar descriptions like: “When leaving Syria, I asked for the most safe route. I knew how to leave, what to do, where to go, the permits I needed. I got this information from others leaving before us. I learned from their information. We heard of different ways of leaving, routes that were more dangerous, those who were killed. The information was spread via the Internet and social media. I talked to those who left before me. We never considered taking a dangerous route” (Interview 124-SWE).

*So, we started thinking about how to leave Syria to Turkey illegally. This was the first time we would try, and of course I was checking the news updates on Facebook that people are leaving, and there was one of my husband's relatives who had left to Austria. We used to hear the news and ask about people leaving but we had not really thought about gathering information. In Turkey, when we formed a group of friends who wanted to go to Europe, we started gathering information about the way through stories from people and through maps. There was a Facebook page called 'Garajat al-Mshantatin' that even the German press talked about. It used to put a lot of information about the ways of travel, the smugglers, the risks, and their groups that stayed in the sea to help while people were traveling. The information was mostly correct, especially that we left at the times where border conditions were not strict. (Interview 139-GER)*

Another Syrian remembered:

*Regarding the trip, everything was from Facebook. From 2012 until 2016, the Facebook groups were really active. Information was posted by people and smugglers. Smugglers had different names on Facebook, and they were telling general information like 'I have this trip at that time, and wait for me at this location at that time.' I also gathered information about the countries I am coming to, through the Internet as well. Part of the information was correct, other parts were lies. Some people were exaggerating, but other information was correct. (Interview 157-GER)*

The users of these information sources seemed to have quite an understanding that not all of them were trustworthy and accurate. One informant stated specifically that smugglers were intentionally distributing false information on the Internet and "fake news" in relation to the details of travel:

*I knew that there is no regular border between Syria and Turkey and we must cross it in an irregular manner. I had an idea of how difficult it was, I learned it from the Internet, where the information is listed in detail. But it was not to be that accurate, as in fact the smugglers are putting such information on the Internet and take advantage of people's need to cross the border. So they are sometimes misleading people and portray scenarios that are actually much more difficult [in reality]. (Interview 121-SWE)*

## 6. Border Economies

### 6.1. Logistical infrastructures of migration (control)

As described so far, a flight-journey crossing several borders inside and outside of the EU in order to reach a European country deemed safe encompassed multiple different state and non-state, private actors. These individuals offered diverse services, and earned a lot from the way flight-migration is produced and structured by the EU border- and migration-control regime – as outlined in other RESPOND reports (Kasperek and Karamanidou 2018, 2020) – and practiced by the people on the move themselves. Following the descriptions of our respondents, we can depict a heterogeneous, broad border economy emerging alongside, in between, or with these European border- and migration-control policies.

This starts with pre-entry controls, and here especially with the visa regime enacted by national embassies that have recently started to outsource parts of the process to private agencies. Some interlocutors mentioned how costly it was to apply for and receive a visa. The (informal) flipside of the Schengen visa regime, with its negative list, is a lucrative business in fake passports and visas that a number of our respondents who entered European countries via plane had themselves turned to.

As shown in great detail, many interviewees did not secure a visa and were forced to take flight routes on the ground, crossing borders in an irregular, mostly undocumented, and clandestine way. Hereby they were confronted with the official and institutionalized border apparatus consisting of state or intergovernmental actors, with most mentioning specifically the police, the military, and the UN. At some borders these actors monetized their deeds and position; our respondents were confronted as well with the material artefacts and products of the growing privatized of border- and migration-control industries (Cranston, Schapendonk, and Spaan 2018) such as with fences, fingerprinting machines, and other similar technical and digital devices.

There are more private actors besides involved in the border-control economy enacting logistical infrastructures that help people to cross borderscapes and make the fragmented and protracted journeys that we have described so far: some operate legally, others rather informally, while certain practices are explicitly forbidden and criminalized by European and national laws and regulations like the carrier sanctions. The routes our respondents had to take produced, and were produced by, a plethora of different services from transportation, over accommodation, to food,<sup>27</sup> to the supply of clothes, means of communication, and as just mentioned of in-demand travel documents. As this woman described:

*There is the General Security, there are taxi drivers, and there was also the money changer present at the border who would ask us if we need a place to rent or anything of the sort. There were a lot of houses, and all they wanted was people to come and rent out these empty houses. (Interview 85-LEB)*

Some actors specialized in these services and developed full packages; on the other hand, many accounts hint at the fact that there are certain interlinkages and connectivities between state and private actors. There are also some actors, as this quote reveals, that try to profit from both parties involved, namely the border regime practitioners and the refugee-migrants:

<sup>27</sup> Some seemingly earned money just selling cigarettes along the routes (Interview 128-SWE).

*When I came here the second time, I came with a taxi driver that I knew from Horms and I paid him so that he could reserve a hotel and make my papers. This time it worked at the border and they let me in without any problems, I was able to get in this time legally. After that, I realized that I wasn't able to enter the first time because of the taxi driver himself. He tried to bribe the officials at the border, and they didn't accept it, so he didn't present the papers in the right way. (Interview 90-LEB)*

## 6.2. Smuggling economies

Smuggling is a phenomenon that has been extensively researched in Migration Studies, and we know that it takes on different organizational forms and is highly interlinked with restrictive migration and border politics that produce the demand for such logistical services in the first place. Our interview material also shows that most refugee migrants knew that they would need the help of a smuggler or believed that “it is better to find a smuggler” even though they were also aware of the risks involved. In certain places and moments, especially during the mass border-crossing phase of 2015, “smugglers were everywhere around at that time,” so that some described it as like “a gang being along the whole route” (Interview 159-GER):

*The people working in this section of things were waiting, so they just said: ‘Europe?’ And you just said: ‘Yes.’ And they will take you. So we met someone, and he said: ‘Ok, I will take you to the island called Mytilene in Greece, and for that I will need 1,000 euros from each of you. (Interview 149-GER)*

Thereby many migrants mentioned that “trust” was an essential criterion defining this economic interaction for them. Especially those who had no direct personal connection to the people offering this service, for example via migrants who had already undertaken the journey, explained how they tried to find a “trustworthy smuggler”; it is unfortunately not clear what criteria made a smuggler a trustworthy one in the eyes of refugee migrants. But they described it as a process of “seeing” and “testing” various different offers, as one Syrian woman explained to the German RESPOND team:

*As we were hearing stories about ships sinking because they were overloaded with people, we had to search for a trustworthy smuggler. I do not know how it fits to say a trustworthy smuggler. But especially as we traveled by sea and I don't know how to swim [...] this was the most terrifying thing. (Interview 139-GER; as well, Interview 149-GER)*

Information about a smuggler who could be trusted and provided a good service was thus passed on, as this Syrian refugee recollected:

*I was very lucky actually. The reason for it was because I paid a lot of money. It was a good boat, not a rubber boat. It was a wooden boat. There were fourteen of us and it could perhaps stand twenty people. I used a smuggler who is trustworthy. I spoke to many in Istanbul who told me he is trustworthy and that many went with him. The journey was very smooth. (Interview 28-UK)*

Most interviewees also stated that they knew that they could be deceived, knowing that, as some interviewees put it, “at the end of the day they are all criminals” (Interview 151-GER) or “at the end of the day they are human traffickers and you are forced to trust them” (Interview

139-GER). Many indeed experienced that the smugglers “really didn’t care about them,” as has been portrayed throughout this report: migrants were left alone somewhere, were told the wrong directions or destination, were deceived concerning the conditions of transport, and some were robbed or beaten. Mostly in Libya, meanwhile, interlocutors were kidnapped, arrested, and forced into slave labor (Interview 30-GER; Interview 163-ITA).<sup>28</sup>

In this respect the porosity and openness of transit passages and borders, but also further factors such as financial resources, estimation of difficulties, and bodily condition, were taken into consideration in deciding whether to turn to a smuggler or not. As this quote reveals:

*We were scared to make the trip to Europe alone and without a smuggler because of some rumors which said that we could be caught and imprisoned. So, we talked to many smugglers and every smuggler was telling us about his way of getting us to Europe: in a truck, in a fridge [...]. In the end, we agreed with a smuggler who told us that he would move us with cars and buses. He lied. We walked the whole time and used the car only once for a brief thirty minutes. We walked: Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, Austria, and finally Passau. The hardest part was in Serbia. We walked through the mountains. We had an old man with us who was almost dying because of the difficult road. But then we found an old, uninhabited house and we stayed in it for one day in order to rest and hide from the police. When we arrived in Belgrade, we barely had any money left to pay smugglers, so we decided to continue alone. We were super hungry and dead from tiredness because of the trip. We walked after that for two days because we were walking in circles [...] walk and then arrive back at the starting point [...] walk and then arrive back at the starting point. We were lost on the borders of Hungary. (Interview 160-GER)*

Smuggling prices varied,<sup>29</sup> not only on the basis of the length or difficulty of a particular trip (as related to natural conditions, the porosity of the border, and the quality of border controls) but apparently also in the pure capitalist sense of supply and demand. Another determinant of price, as an Eritrean refugee who came to Europe via the Central Mediterranean route experienced it, was the prospects that the smugglers would actually ultimately receive the money from the travelers. Despite the high cost of smuggling, many migrants decided to pay the price even if this meant selling all of their personal belongings. As one individual stated: “We sold everything. We were left only with the carpet.” (Interview 41-GR)

Many also noted different forms of interaction and interlinkage between smugglers and state personnel like the coastguard, the police, or the military; some refugee migrants who crossed several African countries also described that militias, military groups, and rebels were involved in the smuggling business too. What we can observe is a certain kind of coproduction between

<sup>28</sup> Others, as already indicated, told about trustful relationships and were satisfied with the service however.

<sup>29</sup> Various prices mentioned by respondents were as follows: The trip from Sudan to Turkey cost for one individual 3,000 dollars, from Iran to Turkey 60,000 Afghan afghani (around 750 euros), from Afghanistan to Iran 40,000 afghani (515 euros), from Iran all the way to Greece 3,000 dollars, from Syria to Greece 2,500 dollars, from Italy to Sweden 1,000 euros, via the Central Mediterranean route to Europe 5,000 dollars or more. It seems that the border crossing to Europe, in this case to Greece or Italy, was an extra cost, with one informant reporting that passing through the Turkish-Greek border on the Evros River cost him 2,000 euros. Another interviewee said that the price for the sea crossing to the Greek islands from Turkey was 600 dollars a time regardless of the number of attempts or of arrest by the Turkish coastguard.

the smuggling business and the political economy of migration control, even if no intentional agreement or cooperation necessarily exists. As this account indicates:

*I will put it simply. There are poor people like us who paid 500 dollars per person. [...] There are others who pay 1,000 dollars per person. So to make it clear to you, the Turkish coastguard tries to drown those who paid 500 dollars by hitting the boat. [...] They hit the boat, and the boat is packed with people and they fell into the water. This is what happened to us. The smuggler when the 500-dollar meal goes into the water calls the coastguard to come. [...] Then those who paid 1,000 dollars come and travel with no problem. [...] The coastguard cannot go back empty-handed. This became clear even to us who are just refugees. Now that we are in Greece, we say all these things. The coastguard arrested some people because they tried illegally to leave Turkey. While they are occupied with that process, the others who have paid more money get smuggled out. (Interview 34-GR)*

### **6.3. (Un)free labor exploitation – debt bondage**

The economic dimension of migration and border controls also refers to the specific articulation of different forms of labor, from free, to unfree, to different types of debt bondage that are assumed by migrants in the context of flight-migration. Especially protracted and fragmented migration projects that lasted years and entailed phases of temporary settlement in transit countries made it necessary for migrants to find ways to earn money and survive, as well as save up for the next leg of the journey. As such temporary settlement and transit-migration are generally not legally regularized, their protagonists have a weak bargaining position and mostly have to accept exploitative conditions and bad jobs in the informal labor market—as many respondents described regarding their situations as Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Turkey especially.

But they were, in principle, free to leave. Some respondents reported forms of unfree and slave labor meanwhile, as revealed especially in the case of Libya and other African countries—where migrants face being kidnapped by various actors and forced to work. Forms of debt bondage were also recounted by Afghan migrants who had to work in order to repay the smuggling fees; in this respect the literature also describes different forms of coercion, dependence, extending up to slave-like conditions. Most migrants, being indebted to their smugglers, also worked under precarious conditions thereby becoming victims of discrimination and labor exploitation (Hugo et al. 2012). This is something that this quote hints at:

*I went to Iran. We had agreed with the smuggler to go to Iran and work there in order to repay him. I stayed there for nine to ten months. I worked there to repay the smuggler. In Iran I was not safe. If you get caught working, you will be deported back to Afghanistan. [...] Because of this, I found some other guys who were coming here, some guys I knew. So, I decided to leave. (Interview 38-GR)*

## 7. Gendered experiences – gendered migration-control regimes

### 7.1. Migration control as body politics

In the last few years we have been witnessing an increased awareness and visibility of gender narratives and analytics not only in the academic field but also in media and political debates on refugees and asylum politics (Buckley-Zistel and Krause 2017; Freedman 2016; Freedmann, Kivilcim, and Baklacioglu 2017; Shekhawat and Del Re 2018). Gender-related or gendered migration studies have shown for decades that gender structures migration in a decisive way, not only in respect of the composition of migration and flight movements but also of how migration and flight projects are practiced and experienced. This Afghan woman also saw gendered hierarchies within the family determine among other things who has the power to decide who migrates, where to, when, and how:

*At that time, I was younger and as you know in Afghanistan women always following their men, the man decides, suddenly my father said we want to leave the city and then they moved to [name withheld], lived there almost three months; at that time I did not have any idea about Europe and to move and leave the country. We came to [name withheld], from there we decided quickly to leave Afghanistan. (Interview 135-SWE)*

The bodily constitution mostly generally differs gender-wise due to social, economic, and cultural conditions and norms in the countries that people are fleeing from, with female bodies often more neglected than male ones. The possible flight and migration routes that, as described, are increasingly structured by long walking distances and dangerous and difficult terrains, disadvantage female migrants and other vulnerable people when they have to cross the desert, the sea, rivers, and/or mountains. As this woman who crossed into Lebanon explained it:

*For young men to cross the borders [illegally] this way [through the mountains] isn't that difficult, but for a young woman with children it is more tiring. You know [...]. Also, some women had children and of course it is more difficult for them. But of course, these people have to leave, most of them were living in very harsh areas, like Raqqa. (Interview 86-LEB)*

Additionally, female bodies due to their natural constitution bring additional challenges with them. As one respondent shared for example: "I did not get my menstrual cycle throughout this journey, so this was a good thing" (Interview 139-GER). Other women pointed to the fact that their special hygiene needs would also cause further problems and require extra safety precautions against the backdrop of the poor conditions they were confronted with during the flight. Finding a shower or a toilet was a great concern for female migrants, for instance as we have been demonstrating so far.

Additionally, in most cases women were the ones responsible for the protection and care of the children in transit, as a continuation of the gendered division of reproductive labor and care from back home. This was true regardless of whether or not they were accompanied by their husbands or male relatives. The responsibility to care for and protect spouses was also



experienced by some male migrants as a heavy burden meanwhile, as this Iraqi migrant expressed:

*The journey was a particular bad experience for my children because they had no choice. I was responsible for that, and my oldest son started to swear at me because he was very tired and my wife until now has bad pains in her backbone. I felt deeply affected by this because I was thinking of my family and my children all the time. The responsibility for my family and children made me ill. I feel really old for not sleeping.*  
(Interview 54-GER)

Most of the time hierarchically structured gender relations also influence the migration project, in the sense that very often women take second place in various decisions—and, ultimately, have more limited chances to survive. Previous research has shown, for example, that during the Central Mediterranean crossings women are positioned in more dangerous places inside the boat, risking easily falling overboard or getting burned from being situated too close to the engine (Gerard and Pickering 2013, 352). Challenging these stereotypes and enforcing their own agency in order to define the course of the journey and participate in decision-making is a task that some women undertake even in the face of massive resistance. This our material captured as well:

*In our journey, the men tried to be dominant and in control. If you want to say a 'NO' to the men, it had to be really high in order to be heard. So, this also caused some problems in our group. They always said I want to be their teacher. I did not want to be their teacher, but I am a part of that group and they also have to listen to me.*  
(Interview 139-GER)

A male respondent recounted with admiration the unified agency and courage of women in the same migrating group as him against a smuggler who was pointing a gun at them in order to compel them to follow his commands:

*It was the Greece entrance. The smuggler was a son of bitch. We agreed to be thirty-nine or forty in the boat, and he gathered sixty-nine! Some young men from Hama, Salamiye, and Mesiyaf were there without their wives. And five powerful women. They told him that we agreed on thirty-nine not sixty-nine. The smuggler said, 'I have a gun, and all will go.' They refused and kicked his ass. They got the gun from him. They were around eighteen and they refused to go. The smuggler's partner came, and they arranged the boat for us without the twenty-eight extra so we became almost forty.*  
(Interview 117-SWE)

## 7.2. Gender-based violence

Even though these quotes demonstrate that female migrants also tried to have a say in and determine their migration and flight project, much of the existing gender-related migration research focuses instead on questions of the specific vulnerability of women (and LGBT persons) and especially on aspects of gendered and sexualized forms of violence.<sup>30</sup> Our interview material also demonstrates that the border crossings and the specific routes refugee migrants mostly had to take, in line with existing border- and migration-control policies and practices, were characterized by different forms of insecurity and violence. Jane Freedman

<sup>30</sup> As titles such as “Gender, Violence, Refugees” by Buckley-Zistel and Krause (2017) demonstrate.



talks of a highly gendered “migration-violence nexus” (2017, 128; see also, Gerard and Pickering 2014). As this migrant put it as well:

*Doesn't matter who's doing that, who are they, where they come from, which country are they from. [...] But if you are in a vulnerable position, if you are not a man, if you are not strong, even if you are a man, if you're not having people around you, it's worse. Especially if you are a woman, you are pretty, lots of horrible things happen. They try to make fun of vulnerability, whatever. So that's probably enough for this question. (Interview 169-UK)*

Against the backdrop of the methodological literature, especially that dealing with trauma and PTSD, highlighting the fact that talking about violence—and especially gendered and sexualized forms of violence—needs an atmosphere of trust that does not always exist in such interview situations, we have to be careful with the following numbers and their interpretation. Nevertheless, a small number of respondents (seven, or just over 1 percent of the total sample) reported attempted or actual rape as well as sexual harassment by various actors:

*I used to have long hair, very long hair, but they cut it, and I was raped by five persons. So, my psychological situation is very bad. I see ghosts and I cry and scream, but I don't want to show all these things and I try to keep them inside me. The one who helps me is my husband. (Interview 33-GR)*

These incidents were either reported by those personally subjected to this kind of violence, recounted to other informants in person, or were part of the overall narration around the flight-journey. The latter shows that this kind of gender-based violence is not only a severe personal trauma with long-lasting consequences for the victim but also a collective one potentially affecting all who follow the same trajectory too: “A story happened. A lady who crossed with us told us a story that a smuggler tried to rape her because she was alone with her little son. She walked with us to Sweden” (Interview 127-SWE). Another migrant explicitly remembered how such a story deeply affected him as well:

*It didn't happen to us, but we stayed in a house, in a cottage, close to the border in Turkey for one week. Then there was a family that came after us from Iran to Turkey, and I heard the story of a woman who was raped at gunpoint by a taxi driver. Then she called her family and they sent a lot of money to him, and she was very scared. When she told me, it was the most difficult time in my life because I thought if it had happened to my daughters, I wouldn't be able to live with that. (Interview 136-SWE)*

As the term the “violence continuum” (Krause 2012) indicates, gender-based violence relates to every phase of the trip—being structured by the different national gender regimes as well as by the respective border- and migration-control policies. In this regard, the routes that refugee migrants had to take as well as the ways in which border crossings were mostly structured implied specific sexual risks to women from various state and non-state actors—as the Cameroonian migrant woman cited already in Section 3.5 would encounter. She referred to it explicitly as “women’s experience”: “When you are a woman and you want to have help, men want exchange. And this is of a sexual kind. Men can help you for free, others want to sleep with you.” However not only accompanying male refugees were asking for this kind of transactional sex, also border guards did too: “There are some borders that, if you are a woman, they would propose that you sleep with them, so that you pass” (Interview 23-GER).

Also, in transit countries these precarious conditions in terms of safety exist, as the very mode of being in transit mostly entails hiding and informality. They give rise to different hazards that

intersect with, are interrelated with, cultural and religious gendered orders. As this female respondent would describe:

*In Turkey too, there was a problem. I saw almost the same thing there, in the car they wanted to use my daughters and touch them, so when I went to Greece I was finally comfortable. I thought too many bad things wouldn't happen to my daughters now that I was in Europe, no one would want to touch them. (Interview 132-SWE)*

On the other hand, these specific cultural and religious gendered orders were for some respondents also the main reason why they chose to head to a certain country to settle down, as this migrant explained regarding his decision not to leave Turkey for a European destination: "I wouldn't have control over my kids and wife there. We like to live the ancient Syrian life in which the man is in control of the house" (Interview 109-TUR). Another Syrian migrant who had the chance to go to Canada but also decided to remain in Turkey relayed: "I didn't go because of the Islam here. My daughters always follow my orders, so I am not afraid [...]" (Interview 110-TUR).

However, the gendered orders of the diverse countries making up the flight routes could also somehow favor the migration of women, as this quote reveals:

*All the way I was cursing my husband. He is the one who let me leave and didn't want to come along. My father told him that he must come with us, but he was scared. He said that if Daesh or Jabhat al-Nusra caught him they will kill him. But they will let me pass because I am a woman. (Interview 115-SWE)*

In this respect also the articulation and performativity of difference and differentiation is highly gendered, which points to the importance of questions of appearance and the right use of signifying artefacts (and the possibility of disguising oneself). In the account of a Syrian refugee who headed to Lebanon it is obvious that access to the country could be more easily achieved via the appropriate secular, non-Muslim outfit, which for her probably meant removing her hijab:

*A guy on the border told an old lady to dress differently and in short clothes to be able to get into Lebanon without difficulty. The old lady thought that she's already old, she doesn't want to throw away her religion, and that she'd rather go back to Syria. (Interview 88-LEB)*

### **7.3. The male body in migration control**

For male respondents the narration around violence included three main themes. The first related to violence in their country of origin and the conscription practiced by many states. Often, as for Syrian men, military duty implies participation in the ongoing (civil) wars. Some interviewees mentioned that this was the main reason for their flight, as they wanted to avoid being involved in a war or to participate in acts of violence:

*Yes, I wanted to leave because of the army and because I did not want to live life anymore in Syria [...]. Every time we had to inform the military that I could not join because of my studies, I could not say that to them that anymore. And now my military book said I had to join in March. It was at the end of 2014, and in 2014 they started to make some rules because all young men started to leave the country. (Interview 167-UK)*

Male migrants are controlled regarding this issue even when crossing the Syrian border to other countries. The Syrian border guards were checking the status of male migrants for pending military service in Syria, with the latter risking not being able to exit the country:

*They did not ask anything; they just did not let those who were wanted to serve in the military leave. All those who [were wanted for] conscription would be taken from the border itself. They took my cousin and my uncle. The Syrian military at the border would tell them that they cannot enter Lebanon because they must serve in the army, and so they take them straight from the border. All those who are over eighteen have to serve in the military. (Interview 96-LEB)*

This specific male flight cause influenced the migration projects of the whole family, as this woman stated: “We had to come in illegally, because my husband was wanted for conscription by the Syrian government” (Interview 82-LEB). Another Syrian woman interviewed in Lebanon remarked:

*Of course, if the situation in Syria gets better and my husband doesn't have to do military service, then I would want to go back. However, now if my husband is at the border they will directly take him to the army, he is wanted there. So, we have no choice but to stay. (Interview 89-LEB)*

The second main theme is related to the precarious conditions in the transit countries in which migrants were stranded for long periods of time. These difficult conditions are related to detention, the threat of deportation, and to physical violence by state authorities. Men were subjected to control and detention almost exclusively in comparison to women, who enjoyed relatively free mobility inside the transit country. Lebanon is the most salient example of that practice, as several quotes like this one indicate:

*The General Security usually stops the men on the streets, and this has given the women the responsibility to mobilize. Now it is the women who have to go to the supermarket to buy things for the house, to go to school and put her children in school, to talk to the administration and all that. (Interview 87-LEB)*

Another interlocutor in Lebanon referred to this gendered mobility and control regime in the following way:

*Personally, I don't have an issue with mobility. But in general, this is one of the biggest problems for Syrians in Lebanon, especially men. No one interferes with the women. It is easier for them to move around; but the men, though it is just one problem, it causes a hundred other problems. (Interview 94-LEB)*

There were several stories, both from men and women, shared on this issue of detention and control targeting men, and on the strategies and routines they followed in order to avoid being apprehended by border guards and the police. According to their accounts, the main strategy is to avoid being present at times either in their own houses or in certain public spaces, where one risks having their ID inspected. In this respect, the mosques in Lebanon function as a place of asylum for undocumented male migrants in the country seeking to avoid state control. As this refugee woman recollected:

*Let me tell you a bit about protection, since we're tackling this issue now. There is something particular about the young men who are living in informal settlements, they always wake up for the early-morning prayers—why? Not for religious reasons, but so they can escape the police raids taking place during that time. If they leave at 3am,*

*they would stay there until 7am—until the sun comes up, because all the young men from the ages of fifteen until forty-five, even seniors in some cases, are at risk of getting detained for having invalid papers. Imagine, on a daily basis all these young men at these specific times are not found in their homes. They are all at the mosque instead seeking protection. This phenomenon is present in all areas, not just here.* (Interview 84-LEB)

The third main theme is that men were seemingly targeted with physical violence by the border and migration authorities much more often, and in an almost organized and planned way, in comparison to women. In this respect, the ongoing cultural, normative perception of men as the “strong gender” disadvantages male refugee migrants. Very often they were systematically subjected to violence and exposed to inhumane conditions during encampment or detention, as if they had to be broken by the use of extreme force or harsh conditions. This quote supports this: “They took us to a camp. The camp was like a place for animals. Women were inside and men outside facing the sun” (Interview 117-SWE). A similar experience was also shared by another respondent: “We found ourselves close to a military island in Greece. They took the girls aside and they started hitting the men. They had something in their hands, and they hit you on the legs” (Interview 129-SWE).

Against the backdrop of the multiple ways in which the contemporary border- and migration-control policies have gendered effects—or, to put it differently, are gendered in themselves—the separate migration of female and male family members that means women mostly follow their male relatives only later has a certain rationality to it. Some female respondents explicitly referred to their separate migration from that of their husbands as a deliberate choice, so as not to expose themselves and their children to the massive risks inherent in the irregular journey. Rather, they send their husbands to take the risky route alone and then later join them in Europe via family reunification:

*I told him that I will not put the safety of my kids at risk drowning in the sea. I told him take as much time as you need in Germany. Even if this takes two or more years. Whenever our papers will be ready for family reunification, we will come to Germany. A year after his arrival we made the family reunification. We came by airplane from Turkey to Germany.* (Interview 148-GER)

The Balkan route and the establishment of the humanitarian or formalized corridor in 2015–2016 also has to be studied as a certain gendered opportunity structure in this context too, as the percentage of women and children within the movement of people increased to, at its peak, over 60 percent (Commissioner for Human Rights 2016). This gender aspect of the humanitarian corridor has, however, still not received much attention in migration and border studies. Yet those months of state-organized transit resulted in a rise of the share of women within the arriving refugee movements in Germany by around 7 percent (to 41.3 percent) according to recent figures (<https://mediendienst-integration.de/migration/flucht-asyl/zahl-der-fluechtlinge.html>). In this respect the closing of the Balkan route from March 2016 disproportionately affected women and children who had already started on their journeys, as the route had until then seemed passable without taking on overly burdensome debts, subjecting oneself to smuggler networks, and/or clandestinely continuing in criminalized, undocumented ways—which was the state of affairs before and after its closure meanwhile (Gerard and Pickering 2014).

## 8. (Forced) mobilities – the Dublin Regulation

The first years of the so-called European refugee crisis found the EU institutionally unprepared to handle the inbound migration flows in an organized way, and one based on the principles of cooperation and solidarity among member states. The Dublin Regulation—which is still the EU’s main mechanism for processing asylum seekers within its borders—has increasingly proved to be dysfunctional. However, it is still applied to different degrees by national authorities as the basis for asylum allocations among the member states. The basic tool that facilitates the application of the Dublin Regulation is the dactyloscopic registration of asylum seekers in the first country of entry, as stored in the aforementioned EURODAC database. Due to the dominant criteria of the Dublin Regulation being that the country of initial entry is responsible for the asylum procedure, many respondents could not, as noted, reach their desired destination or were deported back to where their fingerprints had been first registered: “We were planning to come and stay in Austria, because my dad had family members there, but we ended up in Germany because of the fingerprints” (Interview 145-GER). Especially during the peak days of the migration movements in 2015–2016, however, many countries were no longer able or willing to systematically register and fingerprint all incoming refugee migrants. Many respondents stated that they succeeded in reaching Germany or Sweden without having being registered in any of the transit countries along the way. But it was also a question of luck; one Syrian woman described how she was not fingerprinted, whereas her husband had his logged in EURODAC in Hungary. At that time Germany paused the Dublin Regulation procedure, so the couple decided to stay there:

*On our way to seeking refugee, my husband was captured in Hungary. It is a complicated story, but I have reached Germany without fingerprints and he has reached Hungary with fingerprints. So at that time Germany was the only country that brakes the fingerprint, so we had to stay in Germany, and he lost his degree. (Interview 139-GER)*

Ending the journey in an undesired member state was the reason for refugee-migrants striving to avoid giving their fingerprints in one of the transit countries along the route. Some were already informed about this procedure beforehand, knowing even the Dublin agreement by name:

*I didn't have anywhere else to go because if you get your fingers stamped, I don't know how you call it [...] the Convention [...] yeah, the Dublin Convention [...]. For instance, if I have a German visa but I apply somewhere else in Europe then they will send me back there. So I applied here, and that's that for now! (Interview 101-GER)*

*I talked via the Internet to a friend who was in Vienna, and he told me to come to him and give my fingerprints there. But I told him that I want to go to Germany. (Interview 153-GER)*

For some registered and fingerprinted *en route*, the Dublin Regulation meant the perpetuation of their insecure situation and a prolongation of flight—with many reporting having eventually been deported back to the country where they first gave their fingerprints. However, many also recounted that they somehow managed to leave these places again, and to continue their journey once more toward their desired destination after a number of months. This one Syrian refugee did:

*Italy-Sweden with a plane, but we also did it illegally with fake IDs. In Sweden they split us up. I was deported with force back to Italy. Because of fingerprints in Italy. I stayed for four months there, and then I came to Germany. (Interview 151-GER)*

A few interviewees tried several times to leave the country they were bound to by the Dublin Regulation, as did this respondent who was granted refugee status in Greece. He twice attempted to get to and stay in Norway and Sweden, and both times was arrested and deported back to Greece due to the Dublin Regulation (Interview 40-GR). Another interlocutor, who was interviewed in Germany, was also deported back to Italy by the Swedish authorities due to the provisions of the Dublin Regulation, recalling the situation in the following way:

*I was separated from my brother. I just went to check my papers, if there had been an answer from the immigration center. They told me that the manager wanted to talk to me in his office. They took me to his office, he closed the door, called the police, and that's how my deportation happened. (Interview 151-GER)*

In this way, the Dublin Regulation not only produced heightened inner-European mobility; it also led to enduring precariousness. This the case of a refugee migrant who was interviewed in Hungary but who apparently had already previously stayed for some time in Austria and Sweden illustrates:

*So I was thinking ok, this time I should try Sweden because if I go back to Austria it is very close to Hungary. So they send me back again. But I have heard from people that Sweden is not deporting back to Hungary. So again I escaped from here [Hungary], I went to Sweden. I was there for almost one year and two months [...] yeah, fourteen months I was there. And again, they sent me back here. (Interview 48-HUN)*

Several deportation stories shared by interviewees related to Hungary as a transit country, which for them became a forced destination due to the Dublin Regulation. Respondents referred to this situation as follows: “Few were busted by the Austrian police and were deported to Hungary” (Interview 127-SWE). Another interviewee the Hungarian RESPOND team could talk to recalled: “They did not know anyone in Hungary, and they ended up in this country. Their life went in a quite unplanned direction” (Interview 43-, 42-HUN). Some of these Dublin returnees to Hungary ended up in closed camps like in Debrecen or Békéscsaba meanwhile, where living conditions were described as “very bad” (Interview 42-, 43-HUN).

There were some further examples in our sample of the Dublin Regulation separating families. But there were also cases when the directives of the Dublin Regulation demanded family reunification, as applied to this migrant who should otherwise have been deported from Sweden back to Denmark. As his wife and children had managed to apply for asylum in Sweden he finally got to stay there as well:

*From Austria I got a plane to Denmark, and got caught there at the airport, they got my fingerprints. I stayed seventeen days in Denmark and escaped to Sweden, as my wife and daughter got there first and had their fingerprints taken before me. I went to give my fingerprints; after integration they tried to threaten me and pressure me to transfer back to Denmark – immigration, Swedish immigration. I told them I will go back with my family, I have no problems – I will go anywhere you want my with my family. As my family came before me, and with my name in Sweden, so my situation was stronger; my file was attached to my wife's file, and so I took residency with her. (Interview 118-SWE)*

## 9. Conclusion

The empirical data analyzed within the scope of this report for WP2 of the RESPOND research project has not only allowed us to reconstruct the effects of the existing border- and migration-control regimes on the lives of those constituting their main target. Rather, we have also attempted to show how this analytical perspective on the practices and experiences of refugee migrants also enriches our understanding of what a “border” is today, and how it has been practiced in recent years—particularly shortly before and after the so-called European refugee crisis of 2015–2016. The 507 interviews at hand have allowed us to compare different routes and times, with the varied country composition of the RESPOND consortium providing a rich empirical basis on which to compare the Balkan and the Central Mediterranean flight routes. As a consequence, we have been able to offer a thorough understanding of the effects of different border- and migration-control policies and practices on the movements and lives of those fleeing highly dangerous and precarious situations in their diverse home countries.

Hereby we have illustrated how social capital, gender, and time were all decisive factors producing different opportunity structures as well as risks for those on the move. However, overall the analysis has clearly demonstrated that the journey and experience directly correlate with border-control policies that seek to stem movements of migration and flight by sealing off the border. The report thus reveals that European Union-led border- and migration-control policies—especially regarding its external dimensions—have far reaching spatial effects beyond just the concrete “borderline” determining especially the way the “journey” can be practiced (legally/illegalized; documented/undocumented), the topographical and practical nature of the routes, the means of possible transportation, and the necessary/available logistical infrastructures. In this way, from the perspective of those fleeing the contemporary “border” is spatially and timewise enormously elongated. Overcoming border obstacles is thus not limited merely to the singular act of performing the actual border crossing; the struggle for freedom of movement and protection is rather one over pathways, routes, and logistical means too. The contemporary existing international protection regimes seem only partly able to answer these challenges whereas the current political dynamic of the EU-led border regime hints at the contrary: a dynamic of an increasing use of violent means to combat the global movements of seeking refuge in Europe and sealing off the border, violating and further eroding existing legal and human rights standards.

## Appendix: List of Interviews

No.	ID	Nationality	Gender
1.	AFGH-M-GOE 1110	Afghanistan	male
2.	ALGSYR-W-BER 0208	Syria	female
3.	Austria R02	Afghanistan	male
4.	Austria R03	Afghanistan	male
5.	Austria R06	Afghanistan	male
6.	Austria R07	Syria	male
7.	Austria R09	Syria	male
8.	Austria R10	Syria	female
9.	Austria R11	Iran	male
10.	Austria R15	Afghanistan	female
11.	Austria R17	Nigeria	male
12.	Austria R19	Syria	male
13.	Austria R20	Syria	male
14.	Austria R22	Iraq	female
15.	Austria R23	Syria	male
16.	Austria R24	Afghanistan	female
17.	Austria R25	Afghanistan	male
18.	Austria R27	Afghanistan	female
19.	Austria R29	Syria	male
20.	BILGI_MICRO_21	Syria	male
21.	BILGI_MICRO_36	Syria	male
22.	BILGI_MICRO_38	Syria	male
23.	CAM-W-GRO 1007	Cameroon	female
24.	CAM-M-GRO-2307	Cameroon	male
25.	UCam-DE-A-male_Age30/35-Syria-Interview no. 34	Syria	male
26.	UCAM-DE-Y-female-Age30/40-Syria-Interview no. 28	Syria	female
27.	UCam-UK-A-Age 20/30-male-Syria-Interview no.2	Syria	male
28.	UCam-UK-A-Age 20/30-male-Syria-Interview no.5	Syria	male
29.	Ucam-UK-Y-Age30/35-male-Iraq-Interview no. 4	Iraq	male
30.	ERI-M-GRO-0907	Eritrea	male
31.	GAM-M-BER 0607	Gambia	male
32.	GR-14_08_2018-F	Syria	female
33.	GR-8_07_2018-F+M	Iraq	female + male
34.	GR-11_12_2018-M	Palestine	male
35.	GR-15_07_2018-M	Afghanistan	male
36.	GR-19_07_2018-M	n.a.	male
37.	GR-20_10_2018-M	Afghanistan	male



38.	GR-21_07_2018-M	Afghanistan	male
39.	GR-23_07_2018-M	Congo	male
40.	GR-29_07_2018-M	Syria	male
41.	GR-8_10_2018-M	Syria	male
42.	HUN9	Afghanistan	male
43.	HUN14	Iran	male
44.	Hungary BG_2	Afghanistan	male
45.	Hungary DB_1	Afghanistan	male
46.	Hungary, BG_3	Afghanistan	male
47.	Hungary, CC_1	Uganda	male
48.	Hungary, LI_3	Afghanistan	male
49.	Hungary, SG_1	Afghanistan	male
50.	IRA-F-Ber 0512	Iraq	female
51.	IRA-M-BER 2011, 228	Iraq	male
52.	IRA-M-Ber 2011	Iraq	male
53.	IRA-M-BER-18.12	Iraq	male
54.	IRA-M-BER2-0208	Iraq	male
55.	IRA-M-GOE-1110	Iraq	male
56.	IRA-M-GOE-1909	Iraq	male
57.	Italy File 01	Gambia	male
58.	Italy File 02	Gambia	male
59.	Italy File 03	Gambia	male
60.	Italy File 04	Gambia	male
61.	Italy File 05	Cameroon	male
62.	Italy File 06	Nigeria	male
63.	Italy File 07	Nigeria	male
64.	Italy File 08	Nigeria	male
65.	Italy File 09	Ghana	male
66.	Italy File 10	Nigeria	male
67.	Italy File 11	Nigeria	male
68.	Italy File 12	Ghana	male
69.	Italy File 13	Sierra Leone	male
70.	Italy File 14	Ivory Coast	male
71.	Italy File 15	Morocco	male
72.	Italy File 16	Liberia	male
73.	Italy File 17	Libya	male
74.	Italy File 19	Ghana	male
75.	Italy File 20	Nigeria	female
76.	Italy File 21	Nigeria	female
77.	Italy File 22	Nigeria	female

78.	Italy File 24	Senegal	male
79.	Italy File 25	Gambia	male
80.	Italy File 27	Nigeria	male
81.	Italy File 29	Ivory Coast	male
82.	LEB_Micro_female_05.12.2018_Tripoli_Damascus(rural)	Syria	female
83.	LEB_Micro_female_05.12.2018_Tripoli_Homs2	Syria	female
84.	LEB_Micro_female_10.11.2018_MajdalAnjar_Heartproblems	w.i.	female
85.	LEB_Micro_female_10.12.2018_MajdalAnjar_Girlsschool	Syria	female
86.	LEB_Micro_female_12.10.2018_MountLebanon_FamilyBusiness	Syria	female
87.	LEB_Micro_Female_14.12.2018_Bourj_Palestinian	Syria	female
88.	LEB_Micro_female_16.11.2018_Beirut_Aleppo	Syria	female
89.	LEB_Micro_female_21.10.2018_MountLebanon_FamilyBusiness	Syria	female
90.	LEB_Micro_female_23.10.2018_Zahle_LoveZahle	w.i.	female
91.	LEB_Micro_male_03.10.2018	Syria	male
92.	LEB_Micro_male_03.10.2018_Akkar_Solitary	Syria	male
93.	LEB_Micro_male_03.11.2018_Akkar_Hunters	Syria	male
94.	LEB_Micro_male_03.12.2018_Beirut_Freedom	Syria	male
95.	LEB_Micro_male_04.12.2018_Beirut_Stabbed	Syria	male
96.	LEB_Micro_male_10.12.2018_MajdalAnjar_Aleppo	Syria	male
97.	LEB_Micro_male_11.12.2018_Beirut_Businesspartner	Syria	male
98.	LEB_Micro_male_11.12.2018_SinEIFil_Roommate	Syria	male
99.	LEB_Micro_male_14.12.2018_Bourj_Palestinian1	Syria	male
100.	LEB_Micro_male_23.11.2018_Beirut_Afrin	Syria	male
101.	LIB-M-BER-270419	Libya	male
102.	LIB-M-BER-280419	Libya	male
103.	OZU_MICRO_44	Syria	female
104.	OZU_MICRO_45	Syria	female
105.	OZU_MICRO_46	Syria	female
106.	OZU_MICRO_47	Syria	female
107.	OZU_MICRO_48	Syria	female
108.	OZU_MICRO_52	Syria	female
109.	OZU_MICRO_54	Syria	male
110.	OZU_MICRO_56	Syria	male
111.	SEN-M-GRO 087	Senegal	male
112.	SRII_Micro_09	Syria	male
113.	SWE_4	Syria	male
114.	SWE_7	Syria	male
115.	SWE_13	Syria	female
116.	SWE_14	Syria	male
117.	SWE_15	Syria	male

118.	SWE_20	Syria	male
119.	SWE_21	Syria	female
120.	SWE_24	Syria	female
121.	SWE_29	Syria	female
122.	SWE_33	Syria	female
123.	SWE_34	Syria	male
124.	SWE_37	Syria	female
125.	SWE_38	Syria	male
126.	SWE_39	Syria	male
127.	SWE_40	Syria	male
128.	SWE_44	Syria	male
129.	SWE_46	Iraq	female
130.	SWE_49	Afghanistan	male
131.	SWE_51	Afghanistan	male
132.	SWE_52	Afghanistan	female
133.	SWE_53	Afghanistan	female
134.	SWE_54	Afghanistan	female
135.	SWE_55	Afghanistan	female
136.	SWE_56	Afghanistan	female
137.	SWE_58	Afghanistan	female
138.	SWE_60	Afghanistan	male
139.	SYR-F-GOE-07.12	Syria	female
140.	SYR-F-GOE-14.12	Syria	female
141.	SYR-F-GOE-27.10	Syria	female
142.	SYR-F-GOE-8.12	Syria	female
143.	SYR-F-MUN-03.09	Syria	female
144.	SYR-F-MUN-0309	Syria	female
145.	SYR-F-MUN-05.12	Syria	female
146.	SYR-F-MUN-09.11	Syria	female
147.	SYR-F-MUN-14.08	Syria	female
148.	SYR-F-MUN-23.04	Syria	female
149.	SYR-M-BER-2807	Syria	male
150.	SYR-M-BER2-0308	Syria	male
151.	SYR-M-GOE-04.12	Syria	male
152.	SYR-M-GOE-30.10	Syria	male
153.	SYR-M-GOE-26.10	Syria	male
154.	SYR-M-GOE-27.10	Syria	male
155.	SYR-M-GOE-28.10	Syria	male
156.	SYR-M-MUN-03.10	Syria	male
157.	SYR-M-MUN-03.12	Syria	male

158.	SYR-M-MUN-04.12	Syria	male
159.	SYR-M-MUN-08.09	Syria	male
160.	SYR-M-MUN-27.11	Syria	male
161.	SYR-M-MUN-28.11	Syria	male
162.	SYR-M-MUN, 160	Syria	male
163.	TAO04032019MICRO	w.i.	w.i.
164.	UK-7	Syria	female
165.	UK-DE-Y-21	Iraq	male
166.	UK-DE-28	Syria	female
167.	UK-DE-A-34	Syria	male
168.	UK, INMOI	Iran	Male
169.	UK-IQM01	Iraqi	Male
170.	UK-IQM02	Iraqi	Male
171.	UR-M-GÖ5-2310	Iraq	male

## Bibliography

- Balibar, Etienne. 2002. *Politics and the Other Scene*. London: Verso, 2002.
- Beznec Barbara & Andrej Kurnik (2020). Old Routes, New Perspectives. A Postcolonial Reading of the Balkan Route. In: *Movements: The European Border Regime in the Balkans* 1(5), forthcoming.
- Beznec, Barbara, Speer, Marc, & Stojić Mitrović, Marta (2016). *Governing the Balkan Route. Macedonia, Serbia and European Border Regime*. Beograd. URL: <https://bordermonitoring.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/5-Governing-the-Balkan-Route-web.pdf> [24.03.2020].
- Buckley-Zistel, Susanne/ Krause, Ulrike (Hg.) (2017). *Gender, Violence, Refugees*. New York.
- Cranston, Sophie, Schapendonk Joris & Ernst Spaan (2018). New directions in exploring the migration industries: introduction to special issue. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies Volume 44*, 543-557
- Collyer Michael. (2010). Stranded Migrants and the Fragmented Journey. *Journal of Refugee Studies Vol. 23*, No. 3, 273-293
- Commissioner for Human Rights. (2016). "Human rights of refugee and migrant women and girls need to be better protected." March 7, 2016: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/human-rights-of-refugee-and-migrant-women-and-girls-need-to-be-better-protected>
- Freedman, Jane (2016). Sexual and gender-based violence against refugee women: a hidden aspect of the refugee "crisis". *Reproductive Health Matters* 24:47, S. 18-26.
- Freedman, Jane, Kivilcim, Zeynep, & Baklacioğlu, Nurcan Özgür (Hgs.) (2017), *A Gendered Approach to the Syrian Refugee Crisis*. Routledge.
- Genç, Fırat/ Heck Gerda & Sabine Hess (2018): The Multilayered Migration Regime in Turkey: Contested Regionalization, Deceleration and Legal Precarization, *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2017.1344562>
- Gerard, Alison/ Sharon Pickering. (2014). "Gender, Securitization and Transit: Refugee Women and the Journey to the EU". *Journal of Refugee Studies* 27(3): 338–359.
- Gökalp Aras, N. Ela/ Sahin Mencütek, Zeynep (2020): Refugee Protection Turkey Report. *RESPOND working paper series* 3. Refugee protection regimes. URL: <https://www.respondmigration.com/wp-blog/refugee-protection-regimes-turkey-country-report>
- Hugo, Graeme, Mohammad Jalal Abbasi-Shavazi, and Rasoul Sadeghi. 2012. 'Refugee Movement and Development – Afghan Refugees in Iran'. *Migration and Development* 1 (2): 261–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21632324.2012.749741>.
- Hameršak, Marijana / Pleše, Iva (2018): Confined in Movement. The Croatian Section of the Balkan Refugee Corridor. In: Bužinkić, Emina / Hameršak, Marijana (Eds.): *Formation and Disintegration of the Balkan Refugee Corridor. Camps, Routes and Borders in the Croatian Context*. Zagreb/Munich. 9–41. URL: <https://indd.adobe.com/view/301e48ae-2011-44e0-992c-789cd03f7669> [24.03.2020].

- Hess, Sabine (2010): De-naturalising Transit Migration. Theory and Methods of An Ethnographic Regime Analysis. In: *POPULATION, SPACE AND PLACE* Popul. Space Place 18, 428– 440
- Hess, Sabine and Kasperek, Bernd (2020): Historicising the Balkan Route. Governing migration through mobility. In: William Walters / Charles Heller (Eds.): *Viapolitics. Migration, Borders and the power of Locomotion*. Forthcoming
- Hess, Sabine, and Bernd Kasperek (2019): The Post-2015 European Border Regime. New Approaches in a Shifting Field. In: *Archivio antropologico mediterraneo*, no. 21 (2), 1-16
- Hess, Sabine, and Bernd Kasperek. “De- and Restabilising Schengen: The European Border Regime after the Summer of Migration.” *Cuadernos Europeos de Deusto: Governing Mobility in Europe: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 56 (2017): 47-78, <http://ced.revistas.deusto.es/issue/view/196>
- Karamanidou, Lena/ Kasperek, Bernd (2018): *Border Management and Migration Control in the European Union*, <https://www.respondmigration.com/wp-blog/2018/8/1/comparative-report-legal-and-policy-framework-of-migration-governance-pclyw>
- Karamanidou, Lena/ Kasperek, Bernd (2020) *Accountability and Transparency in European Governance of Migration. The Case of Frontex*, forthcoming, <https://www.respondmigration.com>
- Kasperek, Bernd (2016): Routes, Corridors, and Spaces of Exception. Governing Migration and Europe. In: *Near Futures Online. Europe at a Crossroads. Managed Inhospitality 1*. URL: [http://nearfuturesonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Kasperek\\_Final\\_PDF.pdf](http://nearfuturesonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Kasperek_Final_PDF.pdf) [24.03. 2020].
- Krause, Ulrike (2012): A Continuum of Violence? Linking Sexual and Gender-based Violence during Conflict, Flight and Encampment. In: *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 24: 4, S. 1-19.
- Lahav, Gallya, and Virginie Guiraudon (2000): Comparative Perspectives on Border Control: Away from the Border and Outside the State. In: Peter Andreas and Timothy Snyder (eds.): *The Wall Around the West: State Borders and Immigration Controls in North America and Europe*. Lanham, MD/New York/Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 55–77.
- Lavenex, Sandra. “EU External Governance in ‘Wider Europe’.” *Journal of European Public Policy* 11.4 (2004): 680–700
- Rahme, Karen (2020): *Refugee Protection Lebanon Country Report. RESPOND working paper series 3*. Refugee protection regimes, URL: <https://www.respondmigration.com/wp-blog/refugee-protection-regimes-lebanon-country-report>
- Shekhawat, Seema / Del Re, Emmanuela C (Hgs.) (2018): *Women and borders: refugees, migrants and communities*. London/ New York: I.B. Tauris.
- Santer, Kiri / Wriedt, Vera (2017): (De-) Constructing Borders. Contestations in and Around the Balkan Corridor in 2015/2016. In: *Movements* 3 (1). 141–150. URL: <http://movements-journal.org/issues/04.bewegungen/10.santer,wriedt--de-constructing-borders.pdf> [24.03.2020].
- Speer, Marc (2017): *Die Geschichte des formalisierten Korridors. Erosion und Restrukturierung des Europäischen Grenzregimes auf dem Balkan*. München. URL:

[https://bordermonitoring.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/report-2017-balkan\\_web.pdf](https://bordermonitoring.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/report-2017-balkan_web.pdf)  
[24.03.2020].

Tošić, Jelena (2017): From a Transit Route to the »Backyard of Europe«? Tracing the Past, Present, and Future of the »Balkan Route«. In: Fartacek, Gebhard / Binder, Susanne (Eds.): *Facetten von Flucht aus dem Nahen und Mittleren Osten*. Wien. 150–166

William Walters (2015): Migration, vehicles, and politics: Three theses on viapolitics. In: *European Journal of Social Theory*, Vol. 18(4), 469–488

Walters, William. "Mapping Schengenland: Denaturalizing the border." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20.5 (2002): 561-580