

# Online Pathways, Digital Migrant workers: From Empowerment to Monitor Digital Footprints for Refugees

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## Abstract

The text studies how digitality and refugee routes intersect by focussing on the concepts of »connected migrants and the digital footprints of refugee routes in transnational spaces. The smartphone is a key signifier of today's refugee, and possession of one is questioned by government policies of legitimisation and public opinion perceptions of what constitutes a genuine refugee. These overlook the complex question of digital rights and migration's embeddedness in the fluidity of the postmodern world. The text thus deals with the digital world's ambivalence, which is not just a one-way relation of empowerment but entails the risk of complete control over a refugee's body as well. We establish that an important shift has occurred in European policies, one most visible in the process of erasing the electronic traces of refugees on the move and the illegal return of refugees to the previous country on their way, the so-called pushbacks.

**Keywords:** Smartphones, Digital Routes, Digital Migrants, Refugee Routes, Erasure of Electronic Traces, Illegal Returns,



## A. INTRODUCTION

In our fluid postmodern world, it is a quite generally accepted fact that individuals, social groups, minorities, movements, etc. are generally networked, connected, and organised through autonomous communication networks, supported by the Internet and wireless communication, and equipped with digital devices<sup>1</sup>. Bau-man's description of the passage to software-based modernity as a basis for liquid modernity (2000), and Castells' notion of the space of flows (1999) characterise the social turn toward fluidity and shifting of identities, places, and spaces. How, then, are we to explain the fact that the possession of, for instance, a smartphone, is perceived by the public opinion and media reports as incompatible with the status of a real refugee?. Do refugees not live in the reality of interchangeable identities and spaces of postmodern societies nowadays? In European societies, the overwhelming debate on migration has led to denying dignity to refugees and their demonization, as well as denying them communication rights. A moral panic (Husbands, 1994; Bauman, 2016), resulting from the universal fear of global migrations, seems to be the universal response from both the general public and governments; these fears are expressed as identity panics, and they are triggered by media spreading primarily negative information about migrants and migration processes in the broader sense.

In the last few decades, mass migrations from the global South, to which European states have responded primarily by closing their borders, as well as populist policies of segregation, classification, and selection between legal and illegal refugees, genuine and false refugees, real refugees and only economic migrants etc., have revived the issues of political community, exclusion of the Other, impermeable social and national borders, and cultural differences (Zavratnik and Cukut Krilić 2018: 88). The so-called refugee crisis (with its peak in 2015) has posited the question of migration movements in general, as well as refugee movements in particular, in new ways. The late Zygmunt Bauman described it, in his last essay (2018), as but one of the multiple manifestations of the state of interregnum, where usual ways of acting have stopped working properly, but the new ways of acting are still at a very early stage. In this sense, he called for dealing with processes concerning the supposed crisis as intertwin-ing, mutually dependent, and reciprocally influenced.

As a response to the mass movement of refugees, national as well as supranational structures have not only erected physical restrictions to movement across different nation states in the form of state borders, barbed wires and fences, but have, perhaps even more pervasively, enacted different ways of managing both land and sea borders with digital technologies. This has been done not only by means of, for instance, scanning fingerprints or establishing various databases in order to monitor individual border crossings, as was the case in previous decades, but also with more sophisticated ways of controlling the movement of individuals: e.g. drones and satellites tracing phone signals with the European Border Surveillance System (Leurs 2017).

According to the seminal work of Liisa Mallki (1996), the individual refugee, on the other hand, has been predominantly described in public discourses as a helpless, vulnerable individual in need of humanitarian assistance. Such a perception is still among the major classificatory mechanisms, which construct refugees' vulnerabilities. For instance, during the so-called refugee crisis, individuals who used the latest achievements of modern technologies, such as smartphones, during their refugee journeys, were generally not perceived as refugees, as they did not fit the gendered prototype of refugees as passive, helpless, and economically deprived individuals (Zavratnik and Cukut Krilić 2016). In such discussions, it was argued that access to a phone indicates financial means that are largely at odds with a refugee status, and migrants carrying smartphones were widely dismissed as bogus asylum seekers (Leurs 2017). However, against such a notion, powerful calls to give agency and voice to individual refugees have emerged in postcolonial and feminist media, as well as in migration/refugee studies, especially in recent decades (see for example: Spivak 1983; Georgiou 2018). Additionally, digital rights activists also argued that access to information, and thus a cell phone enabling such access, is a basic human right (de Merode, 2016).

Largely drawing on Diminescu's (2008) notion of the »connected migrant« and theories of transnationalism (e.g. Vertovec, 2009), researchers have noted that migrants and refugees might live in one place, but digital devices have trans-formed

the ways they conduct their lives transnationally. In this perspective, this essay addresses three interconnected topics dealing with a small but specific part of the complex relationship between migrations, borders, and the digital world.

First, we shortly examine the concept of digital/electronic/bureaucratic borders at the level of both national and supra-national state structures to show the pervasiveness of these structures in monitoring and restricting the international movement of migrants and particularly refugees en masse. Although in no way a historical novelty, the creation of increasingly sophisticated digital technologies has created further options for limiting such movements; the fluidity of the modern global world is becoming a regulated reality by means of restrictive border policies (see for example: Brochmann and Hammar 1999; Andreas and Snyder 2000; Geddes 2000; Pajnik and Zavrtnik Zimic 2003; Dijstelbloem and Meijer 2011 etc.). The modern nation states of the liberal West have fenced themselves in, using walls that may be physical, electronic, or bureaucratic, and Europe as a union erected electronic e-borders (Zavrtnik Zimic 2003) nearly two decades ago. The trend of establishing hard, impermeable borders at the external edge of the European community was in line with the development of sophisticated information technologies. As we argue in the text, the strategy of returning refugees across the national border – what we call pushbacks – among the countries along the Balkan route, represents one of the biggest problems of newly emerging migration and asylum policies. Such violent boundaries, as Jones (2016), lucidly summarises the nature of modern boundary lines, are among the key mechanisms setting up different maps of spatial movements; this means different mobility modes according to social class, citizenship, country of origin, gender and age. In short, the boundaries classify, exclude, and maintain social inequalities. In this sense, we should reflect on the so-called pushbacks, i.e. refugee rejection policies, arbitrary deportations, and even collective expulsions.

Secondly, against this macro level we demonstrate how individuals challenge such hegemonic national and supra-national structures in their everyday lives through the use of various digital technologies. From this perspective, we focus on the possible potential of such technologies, not only when living in a new country, but also in the course of their refugee journeys - a relatively unexplored area in refugee studies (Ullrich 2017; Gillespie et al. 2018). Nevertheless, against the technological determinism that views digital technologies as mainly liberating and emancipatory, we focus also on emerging »digital inequalities« and complex digital divides, which can produce differences in access to such technologies and options to use them between various social groups. We understand digital technologies as crucial not only in terms of communication, but explore their potential in the area of providing and spreading crucial information. In the words of Georgiou (2018: 49) digital media refer to »digital platforms and networks, used for communication and information production and exchange between individuals, but also between institutions and individuals.

Lastly, we analyse the interplay between contemporary borders, digital routes, and the reality of deleting the existence of refugees. We argue that the new trend is a shift from registering refugees to erasing their electronic traces, and consequently erasing their existence. Over the last decades, the European Union has built migration and asylum policies on registration and classification approaches, while the erasing trend generates »trapped populations« along, for instance, the Balkan routes, where each nation state seeks to push back refugees to the previous country of entry. An approach based on »pushbacks« of refugees is at the heart of erasing e-tracks. When their smartphones are destroyed or taken away, it seems that refugees never reached the border. The state does not recognise them as social actors, they are not registered, the digital trace of their existence is erased, and there is no individual with a personal history, feelings, motivations, and hopes left.

Writing about deleting e-tracks as deleting the existence of refugees and reflecting on refugees' digital routes, we conclude with an open question: can we speak of digital migrants or even of digital refugees? It is not a new observation that the digital world is established as ambivalent through the reality of refugees. On the one hand, access to and integration into digital platforms is crucial for the empowerment of refugees, but on the other hand it involves control over the refugee's body, movements, and digital traceability.

## **B. METHOD**

The research was conducted using qualitative methods. With this qualitative method, researchers try to reveal the universal essence of phenomena personally experienced by a group of individuals. Data were collected through several techniques, including observation techniques, focus group discussions, and documentation studies. Data analysis was performed through three analytical processes, namely coding, combining codes generated into topics, checking topics with theory and further interviews, and drawing conclusions.

## **C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. The construction of e-borders across the EU: a shift from stone to electronic walls**

Already at the end of the millennium, it was clear that border policies and securitization of the centre spread across the territorial extent of the European Union, most notably at its periphery, close to the Balkans and Russia. It was new technologies that contributed to the emergence of new types of borders i.e. electronic or e-borders. This shift has currency in Europe after the East – West division disappeared from the political map, and hard, geo-political borders have been radically changed and simultaneously replaced with two new types of borders: enduring mental borders of the type »Who is in, who is out?, e.g. the borders along the traditional demarcation lines of inclusion and exclusion, or members vs. non-members, and electronic borders, invented by the EU to protect its periphery. The latter is the Schengen border.

In effect it is a new type of fence (hence delimitation) based on modern technologies, which is why we use the term e-borders. In practice, the implementation of the Schengen regime implies restrictive border control at the external EU frontier, supported primarily by high information technologies enabling a high level of e-control. The ambivalence of new technologies, which on the one hand expand space remember the popular catch phrase of globalisation contracting space and time while on the other they radically curtail mobility by means of electronically closed borders, is more than obvious (Zimic, 2003: 181).

The image of Geddes's fortress Europe (2000) is defined by at least three relevant emphases pertaining to postmodern borders, identity and mobility (Zavratnik, 2003: 182–183). First, the construction of new borders: under the influence of new technologies a shift has happened from stone to electronic walls, where the latter are nothing short of the messengers of global isolationist politics. Second, the Schengen e-border is a clear marker of identity boundaries, where the other, who is on the wrong side of the border« is excluded from the imagined community (Anderson, 2006), and where the meetings and encounters of counter-identities, such as of the Balkans and Europe, almost continuously produce moral panics. And third, there exists the ambivalence of curtailed and selected mobility in modern network society, where global migrations are regulated by electronic partition walls that shrink space, while some geopolitical borders are increasingly more impermeable, or only conditionally passable for people on the move. In contrast, the same borders are wide open to the flow of capital, goods and ideas. In the words of Latonero and Kift (2018), refugees today not only depend on a physical, but increasingly also on a digital infrastructure to make their way across to safer places« (2018: 1). In their analysis of the digital passage a competing perspective of the same actors using these channels is emphasised:

Refugees are able to rely on digital networks to both communicate with distant family members and locate the resources they need. Yet, those same tools are increasingly also used to exploit their vulnerabilities. For instance, the movement of refugees is facilitated by digital platforms provided by multinational corporations. But the design of those platforms is rarely catered towards the specific needs and risks inherent to the refugee experience. Furthermore, refugees must contend with the fact that similar technologies are used by governments to increase their control over borders, migration, and access to asylum (Latonero and Kift 2018:1).

Multiple actors, technologies and relationships are involved in the contemporary digital routes of people on the move. Refugees, governments, traffickers, and corporations participate in this complex interplay of paths, border crossings, crossroads etc., and they all have different interests, *modi operandi* and survival strategies. According to Bedoya (2014), the survival of the most vulnerable communities has often turned on their ability to avoid detection« (in Latonero and Kift 2018: 7). Focusing on the strategies of survival on their transnational migratory routes, in which they try to act invisibly to the system of control, and at the same time actively plan preferred routes, it is necessary to introduce the paradigm of

autonomy of migration that puts forward the agency, alternative practices, and ways of »just being« (Trimikliniotis et al., 2015). Refugees en masse, predominantly excluded from access to citizenship, are seen as an important social actor on the global stage that might cause transformations of crucial concepts of postmodern societies, such as citizenship, mobilities, social movements, and migration. In the ground-breaking book of the above mentioned authors Trimikliniotis, Parsanoglou and Tsianos, these new processes and the role of subaltern migrants – as opposed to elite migrants – are summarised in the following lucid description:

Their social imaginaries are constituted by their social actions/struggles their endeavour to escape control utilizing their cross-border praxis in an interplay of digital and non-digital forms of communicating, organising, acting, reenacting and restructuring the order of things; by giving life to what can be defined as movements of a new kind (2015: 24).

Borders as highly selective territorial lines of division and exclusion, based on identity and citizenship, play a crucial role in the events referring to the so-called refugee crisis. The European migration crisis demonstrates the structural violence of the global border regime, as the hardening of borders and the closing down of migration routes makes movement extremely dangerous for the majority of the people in the world« (Jones, 2016: 27). The modern nation states of the liberal West have fenced themselves in, using walls that may be physical, electronic, or bureaucratic, and Europe as a union started this nearly two decades ago. The trend of establishing hard, impermeable borders at the external edge of the European community was in line with the development of sophisticated information technologies, turning border management and consequently control over mobility into largely a matter of surveillance cameras, biometrics, and databases, regulating entry and determining who is »legal« and who »illegal« (Andreas & Snyder, 2000; Pajnik & Zimic, 2003). This focus on control over movement in physical space and control of bodies, based both on bureaucratic mechanisms and the assistance of information technologies, occurred before migrants in groups started arriving at the borders of the EU; see in this regard the example of the USA-Mexican border. As Andreas suggested, new walls around the West were created along the geographic fault lines dividing rich and poor regions: most notably the southern border of the United States and the eastern and southern border of the European Union (2000:1). In order to control transit as well as to prevent further mass migration, governments thus fell back on classical, physical endeavours, well-known from the historical arsenal of defence policies, based on building walls and implementing walling-off policies. New forms of borders replace the concrete Berlin wall; barbed wire and other sophisticated materials used for the electronic supervision of people's mobility have been erected even more quickly, and they have the same political effect in modern societies.

What these policies of closing borders and criminalising migrants failed to take into account was that structural criminalisation of migration creates a parallel market in migrant lives, where human traffickers dictate the rules. It not an

exaggeration to state that restrictive migration policies are among the factors most responsible for the rise in organised crime that has taken over the organisation of most migration routes in the Mediterranean, on the Balkan route, as well as in other areas where paths for safe migration have been closed. In this respect, dying on the road to the promised destination Europe is perceived as collateral damage by the EU (Ferrer-Gallardo & van Houtum, 2014). It seems that Europe's neoliberal policies have accepted this kind of outsourcing, although they have launched the fight against organised criminal enterprises as one of the main features of recent migration policies. Needless to say, various discourses about inadequate refugee reception structures, crisis, state of emergency, and trafficking networks, fail to see the source of the problem in the EU's restrictive migration policies or the national border policies, although these are crucial to understanding the current microstructure and vulnerabilities of migrants. It is precisely for this reason that policy makers are willing to perceive mobility the preeminent attribute of the modern global subject as a luxury that the other does not deserve (Kirtsoglou & Tsimouris, 2016: 8). As De Genova (2016: 35) aptly states: people on the move across state borders are not in fact considered to be the genuine bearers of any presumptive (purportedly) universal human right to asylum, but rather are always under suspicion of deception and subterfuge produced as the inherently dubious claimants to various forms of institutionalised protection.

The historical presence of migration in all societies clearly reveals complex migration practices; and these are evident in modern patterns of globalised mobility through intertwined narratives. From the perspective of implementing restrictive border policies, the trend of border securitisation can certainly be added to the trends in international migration at the turn of the millennium. European policies can thus be seen mainly as closing off the global North to migrations. The paradigm of safety and, consequently, surveillance and restrictions, as the main elements of migration and asylum policies, have resulted in a »we-community« wiring itself in, first with e-borders, and later with barbed wire (Zavratnik and Cukut Krilić 2016: 258). In this perspective, in the words of Latonero and Kift (2018: 8), »we should make sure to remain mindful of the ethics of the digital passage, with a particular focus on the individual's fundamental right to privacy, freedom of movement, asylum, and, above all, human dignity« (2018: 8).

## **2. Refugees and digital (in)equalities**

As Gillespie et al. (2018: 1) state quite poetically, »refugee journeys are profoundly unsettling, formative and transformative experiences in which all kinds of life-baggage have come to be contained in and transported through a smartphone. In this sense, it is hardly an exaggeration to state that the digital has fundamentally transformed not only refugee integration in »new« societies, but also their journeys, although the latter have been relatively unexplored in refugee studies (Gillespie et al. 2018). Also, in the last decades, research on the use of IT technologies among migrants for maintaining transnational ties, as well as accessing and using

information, has been quite a prominent area of research in migration studies, but the focus of earlier research was primarily on migrants and their descendants who have settled in a country, such as for instance, Turks in Germany, North Africans in France, or Mexicans in the US (Smets 2017). The picture is quite different when it comes to more particular studies on the use of digital technologies by refugees. It seems that it has been mainly during the events of the latest refugee crisis (2015) that policies (Internews 2013; 2017; UNHCR 2016; ENNHRI 2017) as well as scientific interest in the issue have emerged more extensively.

As part of the research project *Young connected migrants: Comparing digital practices of young refugees and expatriates in the Netherlands*, Leurs (2017) analysed the selfies, videos, messages and personal profile pages of young refugees living in the Netherlands. He refers to them as »historical documentations of individual and collective experiences, feelings, traumas and aspirations« (Leurs 2017: 675). Drawing on the initial fieldwork findings of this participatory action research project, he methodologically considered their smartphones as a personal pocket archive – posited as an important site of alternative knowledge production. Among young refugees, the main claims for communication rights were the right to self-determination (digital narratives as offering imaginaries of other lives as well as providing evidence of one's precarity); the right to self-expression (the right to circulate information through digital devices and platforms); the right to information (which includes also the possibility to verify the accuracy of information); the right to family life (maintaining family life across borders) and the right to cultural identity (struggles over cultural identity and recognition) (Leurs 2017). Writing about their experiences, Leurs (2017:682) refers to them as performing communication rights from the margins. He believes such practices can only be made meaningful »when fundamentally situated within hierarchical power relations of gender, race, nationality among others and as inherently related to material conditions and other basic human rights including access to shelter, food, well-being and education« (Leurs, 2017: 684).

In this respect, several digital initiatives, which in the words of Georgiou (2018: 45), »directly contest the representational space of mainstream media«, have recently been launched. In her analysis, she focuses on four institutional and grassroots digital projects that use refugee and migrants' voices to narrate the story of the »crisis«. In her view, in initiatives such as *I am a refugee/I am a migrant* and *Aware Migrants*, migrants and refugees are presented as conditional, exceptional and inferior to European humanity and rationality: there is an emphasis on commonality (migrants are »people like us«). Such a representation of refugees does open up possibilities for their humanisation, but there are conditions on how they should behave, if they are to be accepted. On the other hand, such a narrative »detaches them from regional and global struggles and structural inequalities that explain their journeys, struggles and precarity« (Georgiou 2018: 55). In grassroots initiatives (she has analysed the *Transnational Refugee Radio Network* and the *Migrant Voice* initiative), these issues are tackled as contesting national and

transnational injustices, although the conditionality of the refugees' right to speak is still set to them, but not by them: they speak as eloquent, assertive and powerful voices, and as actors with some symbolic power, appearing vulnerable but agentive (Georgiou 2018). Georgiou further (2018) maintains these initiatives provide examples of how digital Europe is symbolically challenging as well as reaffirming the continent's borders and is as such deeply implicated in the constitution of bordering power through the incorporation of refugee and migrant voices<sup>2</sup> in complex and contradictory ways. She views the regulation of mobility and the conditionality of the rights of migrants as crucial aspects of the concept of bordering power.

Gillespie et al. (2018) have argued that due to the repression faced e.g. by Syrian refugees in their country of origin, they actually replicate particular subversive smartphone practices when planning their journeys. These strategies involve, among others, protecting their digital identities and information about migration routes, using closed Facebook groups and encrypted platforms such as WhatsApp. The digital passage is thus not only dangerous and insecure for refugees, but also a space of hopes, resilience, and survival. Especially the Syr-ians in the study faced genuine fears that their online profiles and activities would be accessed and monitored by the regime in Syria, and in this sense they were described as commuting between visibility and invisibility (ibid.). In this manner, Wall et al. (2017) provide an interesting example of how refugees actually appropriate technology for their own means - refugees with SIM cards from both Syria and Jordan, where they were residing, swapped the cards in and out of their phones, depending on who they were calling - for security issues as well as reliability of coverage. In this way, they were perceived as using their mobile devices in ways not necessarily envisioned by mobile providers. It could thus be argued that with each of the new technologies comes a dialectical tension between the possibilities for benefit and harm for refugees« (Gillespie et al. 2018: 9). In a similar manner, Ullrich (2017) maintains that using digital media may help refugees remain invisible by organising themselves during their journey - for instance, by sharing almost real-time information about border situations (e.g. uncontrolled routes), or video sharing in social media. In this way, they are able to react more flexibly, stay invisible by avoiding border and other controls, and their digital mobility through smartphones contributes to their geographical mobility (Ullrich 2017: 8). Mezzadra (2017: 3) aptly summarises that »practices aimed at making themselves invisible to the state and other control agents are part and parcel of migrants' agency, both en route and where they eventually settle – particularly when they confront processes of illegalisation.

Gillespie et al. (2018) have also noted a particular gender dimension to the use of technology when conducting their research among Iraqi and Syrian refugees in France. They noted that in particular female refugees were more comfortable being interviewed through WhatsApp by female interviewers and that none of the females accompanied by a husband could participate in the research. Wall et al. (2017)

conducted a study among Syrian refugees in Jordan and similarly found that for instance young unmarried women, who were less comfortable to navigate the refugee camp alone, had less access to information and, furthermore, they typically did not use cell phones for communication purposes. In a similar manner, the Global UNHCR staff connectivity survey from 2015 (UNHCR 2016) has also found that women, the less educated, and the elderly generally had lower levels of access to digital technologies. The existence of so-called »connectivity managers« who purchase mobile phones for the whole household and then control access for particular members of the household was also highlighted in the study. This fact points to the importance of an intersectional study of the social norms that dictate access as well as non-access to particular forms of technologies.

In a similar vein, Smets (2017), based on his observations among the Syrian refugees in Turkey, argues that implicit power dynamics related to media use could be observed, where a special status in the refugee community was granted based on the ownership of particular devices, such as laptops and smartphones. Smets also notes a particular gender dimension to these power dynamics, as control over ownership and use was mostly performed by men. However, Smets (2017) also found examples of how digital devices were shared, some being part of the refugee camp infrastructure, and some privately owned but shared with family members and/or other members of the community. In this sense, such practices were creating an important informal economy of solidarity within which shared use of these technologies was negotiated. In the words of Gillespie et al. (2018: 2), digital infrastructures are implicated in complex operations of power, control, and inequality« and demographic characteristics, ideological positions, and linguistic, social, and cultural competencies and forms of digital literacy and access shape uses (Gillespie et al. 2018: 4). As Gillespie et al. (2018: 5) maintain:

Smartphone practices among refugees are contingent upon fragile and unpredictable assemblages of material infrastructures – hardware and software. These include technical systems such as Wi-Fi, SIM cards, charging docks, and plugs. This is the installed base of energy systems for electricity and power. Smartphones must »plug into« these other infrastructures and tools in a securitized fashion. At the same time, smartphones alone are insufficient. Refugees on the move depend on analogue materials such as sealable plastic bags to keep devices dry, information leaflets and stickers at refugee camps, and hand-drawn maps to use if batteries die out.

In this sense, it is clear why Gillespie et al. (2018) speak of infrastructural vulnerabilities, as the reliance on smartphone connectivity is infused with risk and possibilities of exploitation, not only during the refugees' journeys but also, although to a lesser extent, when living in a »new country«. Wall et al. (2017), conducting research among Syrian refugees living in a refugee camp in Jordan, have, referring to the problems refugees experience when accessing insecure, unstable and undependable news and personal information, leaving them vulnerable to misinformation and rumours, described the state they are living in as »information

precarity«. The usage of cell phones was thus viewed as an important strategy to cope with such a condition, although the possibilities to access an internet connection, continued government surveillance, and images of refugees being put online, purporting their further victimisation through various social media and news platforms, strongly demonstrated that merely providing access to a cell phone could not solve information related problems (Wall et al. 2017).

Based on these research insights, it is no exaggeration to state that refugees rightly fear that their smartphones will be seized, damaged or even destroyed by traffickers and/or border guards, or that their smartphone data will be used to monitor and control them. It is this »potential« of digital devices that we address next in greater detail.

### **3. Destroying smartphones: erasing the e-tracks of the existence of refugees**

It seems that the new strategy for controlling refugees on their planned routes, crossing national borders, is mainly aimed at erasing their electronic traces, where the principal method used is to destroy the mobile phones of people on the move. This approach of erasing »undesirable travellers« is the opposite of the registration system as a key element of classifying individual refugees; the electronic footprints of people on the move are lost in the destruction of their smartphones. This means that the planned refugee path is completely interrupted, but also that no personal name and surname appears in the system recording and controlling the border crossing. Consequently, a nation state does not have to deal with another asylum application, while connected refugees become disconnected from routes, networks of refugees and their families in transnational space.

To illustrate this trend, we refer to the field data from the so-called Balkan route, currently also called the »Bosnian route«, which leads through Bosnia and Herzegovina to Croatia and Slovenia, and which is strongly characterised by alarming trends in police violence at the borders of the EU countries and in the EU's antechamber. Furthermore, many reports point to restrictions of access to asylum, as well as forced and arbitrary returns, which do not have any legal basis in asylum procedures, referring to the existing practice of »pushbacks«<sup>3</sup>. The purpose of all the power systems of the nation states on the Balkan route is obvious: to completely control refugee movements, capture refugees on the way, and finally return them in a »domino effect« system; i.e. return them to the previous country of entry, with the process continuing until the last possible destination. In this process, it matters increasingly less, whether the next country is a safe country and/or if the state is known for human rights violations. For instance, the findings of Amnesty International Slovenia's research mission to Velika Kladuša and Bihač, Bosnia and Herzegovina, clearly show a marked increase in the trend of forced returns of refugees without proper legal procedures, so called »pushbacks«, one of the biggest problems of newly emerging migration policies.

To illustrate the domino effect, we summarize the example of a family from Iran who tried to come to Slovenia and apply for asylum, but was returned first to

Croatia and finally to Bosnia and Herzegovina. The story is by no means an isolated testimony of the »trapped people« in the Velika Kladuša refugee enclave, pushed back by the European Union's nation states to the Schengen periphery and beyond:

The police took us somewhere. We did not know where we were, because nobody told us anything. They took the fingerprints of all, including our baby. We told the translator that we wanted asylum, but we are not sure that he actually told this to the police. / ... / Then they put us in a police car and drove us out. We thought that we would go to the asylum seekers' centre, but when the door of the van was opened, we found out that they took us back to the Slovenian-Croatian border. Then they handed us over to the Croatian police (Amnesty International 2018: 5).

In Croatia, the family was then given temporary permission to stay in the country for seven days. After this short period the pushback effect was repeated at the next border: »the police told us to show them the documents [temporary permission] then they ripped them and took us to the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina. They have pushed us across the border« (Amnesty International 2018: 5).

Many interviewed refugees talked about the violence and the brutal methods of the police. »Croatian police beat people, took their phones and money«, a refugee from Algeria said. The Syrian group states: When they surrendered us to Croatia, they listed our names on paper and photographed us. After taking a photo, they drove us to the border between Croatia and Bosnia, where they destroyed our mobile phones. With the screwdriver they destroyed the power supply (Amnesty International 2018: 15).

Destruction of mobile phones is more than a random strategy, as it is not just about seizing devices, but about physically destroying evidence of the existence of a mobile device owner. Deleting digital footprints deletes the reality of the existence of refugees on their way, and the control of national borders seems almost completely manageable and consistent. The impermeable national border is once again defended, this time against »digital refugees«. Forced returns and deletion of electronic traces are a closely connected phenomenon, enabling the silent coexistence of a new type of migration management at Europe's borders with the already established restrictive migration policies at the heart of the EU's mobility plan for third-country nationals; i.e. for those on the wrong side of the Schengen border, who are excluded from membership, while a destroyed or seized smartphone can no longer help them navigate the insecure route to Western Europe. Relying on NGO field reports,<sup>4</sup> it is clear that the countries along the Balkan route have failed to offer protection to newly arrived refugees, and instead have pushed them back to their previous country of transit or even another country, without giving them the right to claim asylum. Violence and intimidation from people in authority has replaced the approach of providing safety and protection to people on the move.

At this point, the ambivalent nature of the digital routes appears to be a risk, not just a means of empowerment for refugees on their journeys. When they use their smartphones to connect through networks on digital platforms, they risk

systematic state control over their bodies, routes, and plans. The smartphone is therefore not only an object to be seized and destroyed in order to erase tracks: the geo-locatable data are navigation and survival tools to the refugees, but they also enable both state and non-state actors to monitor, exclude, capture and detain them (Gillespie et al. 2018). Such practices refer, for instance, to the ability of the refugee-sending countries to monitor, through these electronic traces, both the geographical movements and communications of refugees with their family members left behind, exposing them, and especially their families in their countries of origin, to dangerous and vulnerable situations. The previously mentioned practices, such as communicating via closed groups and encrypted platforms in order to avoid such control are thus quite widespread among refugees. We are also witnessing, in the words of Bigo (2015: 58) a biopolitical management of populations at borders« in the form of surveillance tools such as satellite tracking systems and sensors. People are even prevented from coming, if they have not been entered into the data system, and such anticipation of unknown behaviour and the prevention of future actions is seen as justifying the technology and management of surveillance at a distance, in the name of both the supposed protection of migrants/refugees as a social group and the protection of the EU's external borders (Bigo, 2015).

Surveillance, exclusion and rejection of refugees clearly reveal the power structure, the denial of access to the territory of the EU and exclusion from communities and citizenship. It seems that refugees disconnected from their mobile phones form a new group of erased people, trapped along the digital routes. Their existence is predominantly marked by pushbacks towards state borders and further beyond the EU's external borders, and by the unbearable, dehumanized conditions of living in refugee enclaves, such as the mentioned Velika Kladuša in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is reasonable to conclude that smartphones taken away from refugees and destroyed by the state systems of control reduce the refugees' potential for autonomous operation, increase inequalities, and exclude refugees from the wider field of communication rights.

In addition, without ambitious interventions in the terminology, which might reflect the daily reality of people on the move more adequately, we conclude these reflections on the interconnectedness of refugee journeys, networking paths, the digitization of border crossings, electronic borders, and other imprints of the postmodern networked society with the question: Is it right to talk about digital refugees and digital migrants? In this respect, we suggest that the term digital refugees or digital migrants adequately reflects the reality of digital journeys, and the determination of modern migratory pathways by technologies; of course, there is no unambiguous answer when it comes to empowerment, and when it is primarily about control over refugees. It is not a novelty that the digital world is established as ambivalent through the reality of refugees. On the one hand, access to and integration into digital platforms is crucial for the empowerment of refugees, but on the other it involves the control over the refugee's body, movements, and digital traceability.

## D. CONCLUSION

Despite complex digital infrastructures monitoring the movement of populations across national borders, migrants and refugees increasingly make use of various digital technologies and devices. Such technologies help them to acquire information about their journeys across various nation states, about their »countries of arrival« and the situation in the countries they have fled, as well as helping them communicate with their family members and friends »across national borders«. Furthermore, they help them find new forms of »resistance« to the above-described restrictive migration and refugee policies, although new digital inequalities are created at the same time. By insisting on the complex and often contradictory potential of such technologies, our effort has focused on situating refugee use of digital technologies at the intersection of the structure/agency divide.

However, in his analysis of the legal foundations of the right to communicate in light of new digital technologies, Leurs (2017) argues that in the policy documents at the EU level communication rights have remained quite underdeveloped for political reasons. The acknowledgment of communication rights to minority/migrant groups in policy documents could lead not only to protecting them as vulnerable, but they could also become more empowered in gaining voice, agency and subjectivity in public deliberations (ibid.). This does not seem to be a policy priority of the EU or its nation states. The recent policy developments in favour of even more restrictive migration management, and the generally unfavourable public attitude to migration and/or refugees both lead us in this direction. Additionally, the restructuring of the welfare state that increasingly reduces the social protection afforded to migrants and/or refugees, and often perceives them as unworthy of such protection and/or even as a social group that abuses welfare, further constructs refugees as objects rather than subjects of policy interventions.

Digital technologies, having the potential to provide more democratic forms of communication, thus also bear a strong potential to exclude, differentiate, and categorise individuals in their rights to access and using them for communication purposes, as has been demonstrated in various case studies. Such complex linkages could undoubtedly be better explored through the use of new methods and their combination with more established ones, for example, mixed and mobile methods, such as content and discourse analysis, multi-sited interviews with refugees, policy document analysis (Gillespie et al. 2018); interviews followed by a digital ethnography, involving participant observation and conversation on various internet platforms (Leurs 2017), which have been explored quite extensively across various national contexts in recent years.

Going back to the essay's introductory question - How have the new digital technologies transformed the transnational practices and spaces of refugees?. The answers could lead us into several directions. It holds true that migrants and/or refugees can no longer be viewed as individuals uprooted from lives in their »home« countries, as was the case in the past when communication channels were largely absent or scarce. Although they become spatially rooted in their new countries

through various integration mechanisms (housing, schooling, employment, etc.), maintaining transnational ties is facilitated and transformed, although by no means enabled, by the new digital technologies. At the same time, refugees in particular face not only symbolic but real dangers when performing such communication practices with relatives and friends in their home countries, since digital technologies facilitate previously unimagined possibilities of control over the individual's practices and movements. Although viewed as highly instrumental at different points of migrant/refugee journeys, the potential for governments, traffickers and others to control migrant bodies and communication practices must be taken into consideration when analysing such movements. While it would be difficult to conceptualise contemporary refugees predominantly as fluid global migrants, a more nuanced understanding of both their journeys as well as digital embeddedness in the sending and receiving societies can certainly be achieved by taking intersectional (by gender, ethnicity, language proficiency, social class, age, social and cultural capital, etc.) digital inequalities into account. Only in this way can migrant voices in digital Europe, to paraphrase Georgiou (2018), begin to be heard, and digital infrastructures can be explored both as a source of refugee agency and autonomy, as well as intersectional vulnerabilities (Latonero & Kift, 2018).

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