

# LADDERS, KETCHUP, AND MAYONNAISE: THE MATERIALITY OF IRREGULARIZED MOVEMENTS ALONG THE BALKAN ROUTE

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This article explores how ordinary objects – such as ladders, ketchup, and mayonnaise – become charged with political significance in the context of irregularized migration along the Balkan route. In two ethnographic case studies conducted at the EU's southeastern borderlands, we examine how these mundane items acquire new functions and meanings in connection with border violence. Ladders, used by migrants to scale fences at the Serbia–Hungary border, circulate through informal networks and become both tools of mobility and mediators of physical harm to border crossers. Ketchup and mayonnaise, distributed as part of survival kits by solidarity networks, reappear grotesquely in instances of sadistic violence during Croatian police push-backs. Migrants' creative and tactical use of everyday, makeshift objects reflects the codes of structural violence, as these items become embedded in complex regimes of control and resistance. This dual appropriation – from below and from above – highlights material entanglements of humanitarianism, repression, and embodied agency. Drawing on theoretical frameworks of materiality, migration regime, and critical border studies, and by tracing their circulations and transformations, we uncover how borders are negotiated not only through policy or protest, but through the everyday use and redefinition of things.

Keywords: irregularized migration, borders, materiality, Balkan route, EU migration regime

## INTRODUCTION

In border zones, practical knowledge circulates faster than people. The same *pushback* described in a border violence testimony in Bosnia echoes in a whispered warning at the Serbian border. Cautionary gestures, material traces, and mundane objects become part of a shared understanding of migration and border regimes, of the risks they impose, and of ways to navigate them. Resistance, like repression, is collective – co-produced by those who experience it and those who stand in solidarity with them. The agility we witness and the objects we encounter reveal how these regimes are challenged through everyday practices, shaping a form of resistance that we, as engaged anthropologists, co-produce and document.

Ordinary, everyday objects – such as ladders, ketchup, and mayonnaise – acquire different meanings and purposes when encountered at borders. “Trivial” objects – which at first glance have nothing to do with borders and migration – can construct and deconstruct borders, make them stronger or weaker, and create alternative, often non-verbal knowledge (Kurki 2020). Seemingly trivial, objects have the power to influence human experience. Materiality is a lens through which we can observe relationships, both social and those that people establish with objects (Miller 2005). Studying objects encountered at borders allows us to grasp both the materiality of the border and the embodied experience of crossing it. For example, Jason De León (2013) studied objects left behind in the desert along the Mexico–US border, revealing much about how suffering became normalized in the process of crossing on foot. Materiality offers new methodological and analytical pathways in migration research (Yi-Neumann et al. 2022). In accordance with approaches that call for “thinking through things” rather than about them (Henare et al. 2007), ladders, ketchup, and mayonnaise appear here not merely as examples but as material sites where categories of analysis are articulated and disputed.

This paper is based on field research of irregularized cross-border movements in areas bordering the external edges of the European Union, specifically in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. It emerged from collective reflections with other researchers with whom we collaborated on a broader research project. We begin by outlining the broader context. These regions function as key transit zones and external buffer zones of the European Union, while the everyday is structured around the alternation between attempting to cross borders and being forcibly returned, a pattern already documented in other research. We, too, are part of this context, and our positioning within it informs our analytical approach.

The first ethnographic case study focuses on ladders – objects used by migrants to scale border fences on the border between Serbia and Hungary. These extendable fire ladders were observed in different spaces where migrants reside. They circulate through informal networks and are rented to border crossers in precarious economies shaped by mobility restrictions and border violence. The second ethnographic case study centers on ketchup and mayonnaise – consumed by people moving through demanding forest terrain for weeks, while they are forced to sleep under the open sky or in makeshift shelters,

far away from basic infrastructure like electricity or water supply. In both case studies, we witness how these objects turn against the migrants and how material objects operate within complex power relations, shaping the irregularized migration regime.

The discussion of ladders draws on the fieldwork of the first author, while the analysis of ketchup and mayonnaise is based on field insights of the second author. Accordingly, we use the first-person singular when presenting ethnographic case studies to reflect the situated and partial nature of our ethnographic engagements. Rather than presenting a separate theoretical framework, we interweave theoretical concepts throughout the ethnographic material, allowing them to emerge in relation to the objects and practices we encountered in the field. An ethnographic analysis of their materiality led us to reflect on the multidirectional processes of appropriation in the concluding section.

The first mention of particular emic terms (e.g., *game*) in the article appears in italics and is accompanied by an explanation, while subsequent uses are left unmarked. We use the terms *people on the move*, *migrants*, and *refugees* interchangeably and beyond the rigid categorizations imposed by migration regimes, referring to people, mostly from the countries of the Global South, who are attempting to reach safety in Europe.

## CONTEXT

As EU candidate countries at the EU's southeastern edge, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina function as key migratory transit zones, shaped by externalized border control. Within this context, the notion of the migration regime is employed not as a fixed or centrally coordinated system, but as a heterogeneous and dynamic field composed of multiple actors – state agents, humanitarian organizations, migrants, smugglers, activists, journalists, researchers, and others – whose often contradictory practices shape and reshape migration governance as has long been articulated in critical migration studies (Hameršak 2022). Such a decentralized field highlights the interplay between control and movement and the negotiated nature of borders. In the past decade, an extensive body of critical scholarship – of which we mention only a few contributions – has examined how these spaces are shaped by migration governance and agencies of transiting migrants (Stojić Mitrović and Vilenica 2019; Rydzewski 2020; Minca and Collins 2021; Augustová 2023; Zocchi 2024).

Following the EU–Turkey deal and the formal closure of the so-called Balkan corridor in 2016, which had briefly enabled a more linear and state-tolerated passage toward EU countries, migration across the region has become increasingly fragmented and dangerous. The Balkan route functions as a zone of circular movement, where individuals are constantly rerouted, pushed back, or moved between multiple countries within the region in search of exit strategies (Stojić Mitrović and Vilenica 2019). This circularity is not merely a matter of personal choice, but a structural consequence of prolonged waiting, repeated violence, and enforced containment. Migrants are forced to navigate illegalized routes, face repeated pushbacks, and dwell in camps and informal settlements, often in extremely

precarious conditions (Augustová 2023). These circular movements are directly tied to the temporal rhythms of pushbacks and the game: the everyday is structured around alternating between attempting to cross borders and being forcibly returned. The repetition of these cycles produces a specific spatial and temporal regime of mobility and immobilization.

Pushbacks – routine expulsions to a neighboring country – have become a central mechanism of this regime. They are frequently accompanied by physical violence, the destruction of personal belongings, and dehumanizing treatment (Barker and Zajović 2020; Hameršak and Mucko 2023; Augustová 2023). The Bosnian–Croatian border has emerged as a key site of such externalized violence, particularly after 2018, when Bosnia and Herzegovina was perceived as “the last open border” (Augustová 2023: 5). The Serbian–Hungarian border has also been marked by similar dynamics of deterrence and brutality (Rydzewski 2020).

Within this context, people on the move commonly refer to their attempts to cross borders as game – a term that captures both the calculated hope and the constant danger involved. The game is not merely a metaphor, but a spatial and temporal tactic through which migrants attempt to subvert their exclusion from legal mobility by engaging in repeated, often clandestine, crossings (Minca and Collins 2021; Mucko et al. 2024; Zocchi 2024; Khamsy 2025). It also signals a grey zone of governance – an informal and shifting terrain marked by complex negotiations and confrontations between state and non-state actors, humanitarian agencies, smugglers, and migrants themselves (Minca and Collins 2021). The word game in Persian also means game in the sense of a video game, reinforcing the idea of high-stakes repetition, control, risk, and strategy.

A parallel term is *harrāqa*, commonly used in the Maghreb (Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco) to refer to border crossings undertaken in defiance of visa regimes and bureaucratic restrictions, literally translated as “those who burn” (Ciucci 2020; M’charek 2020). While more commonly associated with Mediterranean routes, *harrāqa* also occurs in the context of the Balkan route (Mucko et al. 2024: 69). Both game and *harrāqa* are emic terms, emerging from migrants’ vocabularies and experiences, which have become commonly used and, therefore, culturally appropriated by a range of actors involved in the migration regime. Both terms reflect a situated knowledge of borders and their circumvention, expressing not only the violence of exclusion, but also tactical, affective, and symbolic dimensions of movement. These dynamics of forced mobility are inextricably linked to the temporalities of waiting and what has been termed “stuckedness”. Movement – even when seemingly circular or futile – functions as a vital coping strategy for migrants who find themselves caught in conditions of prolonged immobility (Rydzewski 2020). Continued mobility becomes a way to resist passive waiting, to enact agency, and to maintain a sense of hope and futurity despite spatial traps imposed by European migration governance. These rhythms of forced mobility and waiting also manifest spatially. Migrants’ living spaces emerge at the intersection of different forms of accommodation, including state-run camps and informal squats (Stojić Mitrović and Vilenica 2019). The game and pushbacks shape this everyday structure (Augustová 2023) – rhythms and spaces of departure and return, of movement and obstruction.

## LADDERS

I was inspired to perceive ladders as objects that tell a story of resourcefulness, resilience, and the necessity of exposing oneself to risk in the context of irregularized movement when I encountered them at the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg, Sweden. Tall wooden ladders on display had been collected by an artist in the Spanish exclave of Melilla, where they were used by migrants attempting to enter Europe. Ironically, they came to the Museum of World Culture in connection with the *Trafficking* exhibition, which was framed as “the result of a European cooperation to fight illegal trafficking of humans” (2006–2008) (Muñoz 2011: 189). After the exhibition, the museum purchased the ladders, making them part of the permanent exhibition *Crossroads*, where they were partially stripped of their previous framing and recontextualized within a broader narrative of meetings between cultures.



Figure 1 – Exhibition “Crossroads”, Göteborg, Sweden, 2023. Photo by Teodora Jovanović.

The sight immediately resonated, as two years earlier, I observed similar ladders – though in active use rather than displayed as museum artifacts – piled up in an official state-run camp in Serbia, near the border with Hungary. Although officially managed by the

Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia, my ethnographic notes describe a prevailing belief that this camp was, in practice, controlled by migrants and so-called *smugglers*. Following Stephan Scheel (2017: 393), who explains how migrants recode control mechanisms into tools of appropriation, the perception that this camp had been “taken over” suggests an instance of such recoding – whether real or imagined. Like the tactics described by Michel de Certeau (1984: 37), practices of appropriation operate in an environment they do not own (Scheel 2017: 393). On the southeastern periphery of the EU, migrants and those facilitating their journeys were seen as strategically repurposing an official camp – whether this was an actual shift in power or merely a widespread belief. In any case, the narrative about the smugglers controlling the camp is shaped by the blurred and often problematic categorization of smugglers in Serbia, where the criminalization of movement and the lack of basic needs frequently turn survival strategies into informal economic transactions.

Ladders, as material infrastructures of mobility, illuminate the paradox of border infrastructures more broadly. While infrastructures such as ladders are typically understood as facilitators of movement, some – particularly those controlled by the state – serve to restrict it. As Mari Korpela (2016: 115) notes, infrastructures of mobility do not distribute access evenly; rather, they position people within vastly different and unequal relations to movement. The camp, designed primarily as an infrastructure of containment, paradoxically functioned as a facilitator of movement (Stojić Mitrović and Vilenica 2019: 541), especially when paired with ladders.



Figure 2 – Horgoš, Serbia, 2021. Photo by KlikAktiv.

Along the Serbian–Hungarian border, ladders serve the same purpose as in Melilla: enabling people to overcome the border fence. In the official camp and squatted abandoned structures, they were not only tools of escape but commodities in an informal economy. Those labeled smugglers – who may be merely workers trying to pay for their own journey – rented out ladders at prices several times higher than in official stores and set them up at the fence. Unlike wooden ladders in Melilla, these were extendable fire ladders, adaptable for reuse. Their presence was not limited to the state-run camp. The NGO KlikAktiv observed similar ladders in squats along the Serbian–Hungarian border. This further illustrates their embeddedness in the material and economic dimensions of irregularized border crossings.

This entanglement extends into visual and sonic representations. In the Arabic-language trap music video *harraq* (*The Crosser*), filmed at the Serbian–Hungarian border, the final scene depicts a border crossing using ladders, followed by police vehicles in pursuit.<sup>1</sup> The refrain asks:

Which way do you want to go to Europe?  
Do you want to go through the hole or cross the border by ladder?

The rappers offer listeners – potential or actual crossers – a choice of how to traverse a border that is officially closed to them. This rhetorical move implies that someone other than border guards wields power over the material aspects of mobility (Keshavarz 2024). The content of the video and the song’s lyrics imply that ladders are one of the tools used to “burn” EU’s fortified borders, with the smuggler being the one holding the matches. The lyrics also reference bribery as a key element in illegalized crossings, echoing ethnographic insights from the border between Iran and Turkey (Augustová and Suber 2023). As at the end of World War II when, according to oral history, bribed German border guards themselves held ladders during an act of smuggling (Mikša and Zorn 2024: 73), the song suggests a blurring of roles: those meant to prevent crossing may simultaneously facilitate it. Physical barriers are unable to curb the movement, as the female voice in the first verse of the song insists:

Don’t tell me what I must do  
I do what I want  
My mind moves me

Previous research in Serbia showed that refugees may perceive smugglers as guides, information-providers, and allies (Mandić 2017). This perception contrasts with the dominant, state-centered framings of smuggling, which tend to homogenize and criminalize these actors. Adopting a critical approach to smuggling means moving beyond its legal framing as a punishable offense and instead understanding it as a practice emerging from the processes of illegalization, racialization, and EU border externalization. In this sense, smuggling constitutes a material critique of borders; it “recognises and reworks the

<sup>1</sup> Nina Khamsy (2025: 101–102) describes similar video material, with a ladder in focus.

material and technological features of borders which are vulnerable to reappropriation” (Keshavarz 2024: 1143).

Ladders are potentially dangerous objects, even in a non-migration context, such as the household. They are always approached with caution. A ladder made of aluminum or wood can be used to change a light bulb in an apartment, paint a wall, reach something at a height, or perform any handyman job. It can also be used to climb over a border fence intended to prevent entry into a territory. In the context of illegalized border crossing, the danger is significantly greater, as evidenced by a KlikAktiv Facebook post from January 21, 2021:

#### FROM THE FIELD

While working with refugees, we noticed that some of the most common injuries they encounter when trying to cross borders are leg injuries. These injuries happen to them while jumping the fence – when they are in a hurry, they are in fear or they are being chased by the police, so they do not have enough time to go down the fence more or less carefully. However, there is another reason why fractures and sprains of the legs, feet and ankles are so common. To make the whole story more understandable, we give you a brief insight into what a part of the border crossing between Serbia and Hungary looks like. In front of the fence itself, there is a barbed wire on the ground through which the refugees break through crawling, covered with blankets or sleeping bags, so that the wire would not cut them. After being dragged through the several meters long barbed wire trap as soldiers in the movies, two fences await them. Both are about four meters high and are also wrapped in layers of barbed wire at the top. The distance between the two fences – the patrol zone – is so large that only two police jeeps can pass in the passage. In order to cross those two fences, people pay the smugglers large amounts of money so that they can set the ladder for them to cross one and the other fence at the right time. Many people from the refugee population set out on a journey with a very limited amount of money and very often do not have the money to pay for crossing the entire fence or are saving money for the further journey. In that case, they decide to pay money to cross the first fence and to climb to the top of the second fence, from which they will then jump in the hope that they will be able to land on the ground without major injuries. There are whole groups of people who get ladders for climbing and descending from the first fence from the smugglers, while only one ladder for climbing is set for the second fence, and there is no ladder for descending, because they are not paid. Then there is a jump awaiting for all of them. This causes severe injuries that will follow most people throughout their lives, because they are usually not treated in time and, above all, not treated well enough medically.<sup>2</sup>

Climbing up ladders, descending down ladders, and jumping from fences when there are no ladders – these are body techniques at the border. Body techniques that migrants learn *en route* are unique to the context of illegalized border crossings. They are shaped by a complex network that includes border enforcement practices, the environment, migrant

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1B6YXEb5kh/>.

material culture, smugglers, and other factors (De León 2013: 329). Ladders serve as an element of the subversive activity of “burning borders” and are also an element of violence at the borders. Serious physical injuries can occur if the risks and body techniques of using ladders are not mastered.

The border fence and the ladder are not merely opposing objects; they are co-constitutive actors in a contested material landscape. While its materiality, height, and density already convey a message of exclusion, the fence on the border between Serbia and Hungary also articulates that message vocally, in the first-person singular. It is a speaking fence, quite literally. A disembodied voice emanates from loudspeakers, repeating the warning in five languages – English, Farsi, Arabic, Urdu, and Serbian (Kallius 2017). It asserts presence, projects sovereignty, and inscribes illegality onto bodies attempting to bypass it. In this sense, it enacts what Bruno Latour (1999) describes as folding humans and nonhumans into each other. The injuries migrants sustain when jumping from the top of the fence are not caused solely by their own miscalculations or only by the absence of a ladder – but by the combined agency of the migration regime actors and its material extensions. Just as Latour repositions the act of killing as an effect of a *person-gun assemblage* (Yi-Neumann et al. 2022: 10), here we must consider the *person-ladder-fence* assemblage to understand what causes harm or enables passage.

In contrast to the state-constructed fence, ladders emerge as tactical infrastructures in replicating and responding to the materiality of the border to undermine its intended function (Keshavarz 2024). The ladder *knows* the fence; it is designed and selected specifically in relation to it – its height, its structure, the spacing of its bars. It is not simply a neutral facilitator of crossing but a response to border violence, a countermeasure that embodies a different kind of knowledge: practical, embodied, often collective and passed on informally. The use of ladders reveals the “interwovenness of migrants’ practices with the devices, methods and logics of control” (Scheel 2017: 392). Ladders constitute a form of material subversion, a low-tech rebuttal to high-tech enclosure.

In 2022, there was a rumor that Hungary would extend the fence on the border with Serbia by one meter. The KlikAktiv team documented a comment on this topic from a young man from Morocco in a Facebook post from August 12, 2022:

If they extend the fence by one meter, we will extend the ladders by one meter, too.<sup>3</sup>

The highlighted quote points to the ongoing cat-and-mouse game between the crossers and border authorities. It underscores perpetual improvisation and tactical responsiveness. It is not just a witty remark – it is a declaration of persistence and adaptive resistance. It encapsulates a core truth: that no matter how high the wall is, people will find ways to climb it. What emerges from this interplay is a shifting terrain of agency and counter-agency. The fence and the ladder are not passive; they injure, alert, exclude, adapt, and

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1BKUxqok1s/>.

resist; they enable and disable movement. The tension between them materializes the struggle over who has the right to move, who gets to design and impose spatial order, and who learns to navigate or undo it.

Ladders are objects used in attempts to climb over fences, walls, wire, or other physical barriers at borders. In the context of illegalized migration, ladders symbolize resourcefulness, resilience, and the necessity of exposing oneself to risk and violence. These objects were and still are used at various borders around the world, including the border between the German Reich and the Independent State of Croatia from 1941 to 1945 (Mikša and Zorn 2024, 71), contemporary Spanish–Moroccan land border in Melilla (displayed in the Swedish museum), the Mexico–US border (Villagran 2020) and the border between Serbia and Hungary (as shown in this paper). Ladders materialize the idea that fences cannot stop migration; they only foster creativity, increase crossing costs, and intensify the risks for those forced to climb over them.

## KETCHUP AND MAYONNAISE

The second case study builds on the analysis of the connection between the materiality of irregularized migration and systemic violence, but in this case violence is direct, physical in the context framed by the clandestine pushback procedure practiced by the Croatian police. In the summer of 2020, Amnesty International published an article titled “Croatia: Fresh Evidence of Police Abuse and Torture of Migrants and Asylum Seekers” (Amnesty International UK 2020). The article refers to an event in which an unidentified, masked group of assailants linked directly to the Croatian police captured and tortured a group of people from Pakistan and Afghanistan during their clandestine transit through Croatia:

Between eight and ten people wearing black uniforms and balaclavas identical to those used by Croatia’s Special Police, fired their weapons in the air, kicked and repeatedly hit the restrained men with metal sticks, batons and pistol grips. They then rubbed ketchup, mayonnaise and sugar that they found in one of the backpacks on migrants’ bleeding heads and hair and their trousers. (Amnesty International UK 2020)

The act itself preceded the handover of the captured people to the Croatian police, who then completed the already routinized procedure of pushback to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Pushbacks carried out by the police or other state security authorities with assistance from various actors became a part of everyday life of many people on the move. Pushbacks can be defined as

expulsions of non-citizens, refugees and other migrants, most often to a neighbouring country. They are forced backward movements carried out with minimal or no administrative procedure, or a combination of formal and informal actions, orders and incidents, relying on means and techniques of control, surveillance, capture and detainment, even including extensive use of force, physical and other violence. (Hameršak and Mucko 2023)

Among hundreds of others, equally important and publicly available pushbacks testimonies collected by the Border Violence Monitoring Network (Barker and Zajović 2020), testimonies from the Amnesty International article mentioned above stand out because of a bizarre detail which quite graphically renders the sadistic frame of the conducted pushback: after beating them up – they coated their wounded heads and faces with ketchup, mayonnaise, and sugar taken from the belongings of one of the captives. Using food as a means of torture brings materiality back into the center of our analysis. Material aspects of the products used for torture open up a space of discrepancy between media discourse on everyday life events and entanglements specific for the migration regime and their interpretation based on field work insights.

With Amnesty International as a reference point, the same news story was reposted by a handful of Croatian media outlets. The official statement from the Ministry of the Interior was published in *Jutarnji list* several days after the report started circulating through the national media. The Ministry of the Interior rejected the accusations: “We don’t understand why they would cover them with ketchup, mayonnaise, and sugar. Again, they are accusing us without evidence” (Hina 2020). As the article conveys, the spokesperson of the Ministry of Internal Affairs recalled that:

“in the previous version of the charges”, the police allegedly spray-painted crosses on the heads of migrants. “The crosses allegedly had some symbolism that was intended to be used during the month of Ramadan, but now we do not know the symbolism of ketchup, mayonnaise, and sugar”. (Hina 2020)

At the end of 2020, the same year when Amnesty International reported about the case, I joined a pro-migrant-oriented collective operating in the Una-Sana Canton of Bosnia and Herzegovina as part of field research about the everyday life of people on the move stuck in Bosnia and Herzegovina on the outer side of the EU border.<sup>4</sup> The collective’s work was focused on supporting people on the move stuck in Bijač who were living outside of official migrant camps, in the area of the so-called *jungle squats* in improvised shelters without electricity or water, situated in a valley at the foot of the natural border with Croatia and the European Union – the mountain of Plješevica. In addition to pro-migrant activism, some of the collective’s primary activities were the distribution of humanitarian aid – food, clothing, shoes, and other means of survival (Clayton 2020: 4). Due to the criminalization of solidarity in the area of the canton, in the period of 2020 and 2021 (Ahmetašević 2020), distributions had to be performed clandestinely, which is why they would take place exclusively at night, in dark places hidden from police and local residents. When referring to the distributions, volunteers used the abbreviated term *distro* (Mucko 2022). A typical list of groceries prepared by the volunteers for *distro* included rice, oil, sugar, salt, flour, tomato sauce, onions, and some vegetables. There were two sizes of packages:

<sup>4</sup> My fieldwork was conducted mainly during 2021 as part of the doctoral research within the project *The European Irregularized Migration Regime at the Periphery of the EU: From Ethnography to Keywords* (ERIM) coordinated by The Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research.

*full bag* with food for a group of up to ten people, and *half bag* for a group of up to five people. There was, however, a special category of packages requested by the people on the move right before going into the game. This package contained the following food items: dates, toast, ketchup, and mayonnaise. That package was known as *game food* by both volunteers and people on the move.

After seeing game food packets in the volunteer's warehouse for the first time, I was quite puzzled. For the people I met in the Una-Sana Canton at that time – mostly young Afghans and Pakistanis – clandestine movement from Bosnia to Italy through Croatia implied extreme physical effort. The game across Croatia meant two or more weeks of almost non-stop hiking and walking through demanding forest terrain, sleeping under the open sky (even in December in the middle of a mountain with knee-deep snow) or in makeshift shelters far away from basic infrastructure like electricity or water supply – and this tremendous physical feat was accomplished with the help of toast with ketchup and mayonnaise? These ingredients were obviously not chosen because of their high nutritional value, but for high caloric content in a small package and because of practical material features of the products, originally designed to enable quick consumption. During the game, they were spread on toast – just as they are squeezed over fries in a restaurant – however, the speed of consumption is not related to the rapid pace of the restaurant guest turnover, but to the feeling of being chased by the Croatian police. The concept of game food belongs to the body of internal, collective survival tactics, and could be interpreted with the help of the term “mobile commons” coined by Dimitris Papadopoulos and Vassilis Tsianos (2013), which includes “alternative, shared knowledge and affective relationships, various forms of support and care that facilitate self-organization for people on the move while moving, but also when finding their way in places of temporary residence” (Hameršak et al. 2022). Game food as shared, practical knowledge was invented through everyday interactions between volunteers and people on the move as a gesture of solidarity.



Figure 3 – Bihać, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2021. Photo by Bojan Mucko

While doing my field research in Bosnia in Herzegovina, the concept of game food became naturalized for me through the volunteering practice (somehow too quickly) as only one of the many surreal details I was faced with in the local context entangled with everyday dynamics of the wider European migration regime. Upon my arrival back to Zagreb, I was retelling the story about game food to a colleague of mine, and ketchup and mayonnaise suddenly led to an “aha” moment. We remembered the details from the article published in various media earlier that year. Game food packages demystified the reason why ketchup and mayonnaise could be found with the people on the move during the pushback reported by Amnesty International.

Looking at my fieldwork photos archive, I noticed that the ketchup and mayonnaise that volunteers were buying at the local supermarket in Bosnia and Herzegovina – products we distributed to people before they left for the game through Croatia – were imported no less than from Croatia. They were produced by the Croatian manufacturer Zvijezda, based in Zagreb. The factory was founded in 1916 under the name Prva hrvatska tvornica ulja (First Croatian Oil Factory) and was renamed Crvena zvijezda (Red Star) after the Second World War, in reference to the symbol of the fight against fascism. It was eventually renamed Tvornica ulja Zagreb (Zagreb Oil Factory). The five-pointed star, appropriated as the factory’s logo in the 1930s, was removed from the company visual identity after the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s (Hrvatska tehnička enciklopedija 2022). At the same time, after privatization – the factory’s historical name was purged of ideological references to socialism and the factory was renamed Zvijezda (with the star losing its red color).

This coincidence – the fact that a group related to the Croatian police humiliated potential asylum seekers using food produced in Croatia by a company with a name that echoes historical references to anti-fascism – struck me as particularly cynical. This entanglement between people on the move, international volunteers in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Croatian police, within the context of the invisible side of contemporary European migration regime, and with material objects – condiments produced in Croatia – in its center, prompted me to create a diagram of the circulation of these products. With the help of the diagram, we can visualize steps of the transformations of their status all the way from a fast food condiment to a torture tool and reflect on the different processes of appropriation within the migration regime.

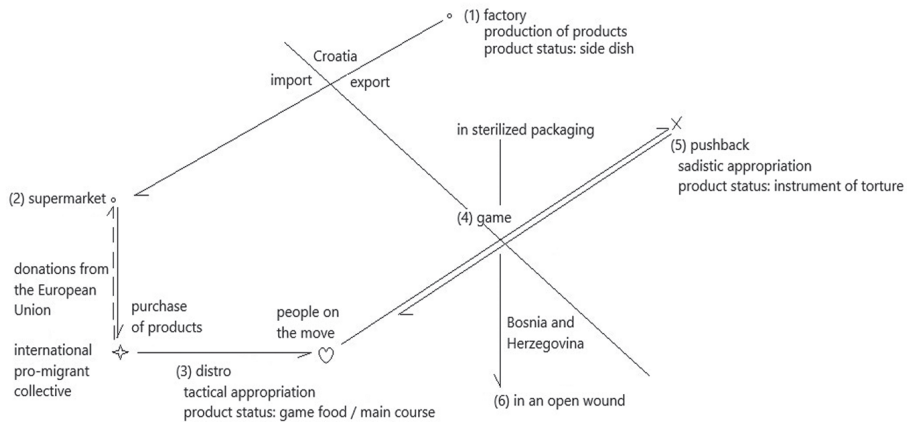


Figure 4 – Diagram, 2024. Author: Bojan Mucko.

(1) We assume that ketchup and mayonnaise produced in Croatia were imported to Bosnia and Herzegovina according to regular import procedures. They were probably transported by means of regular road transportation from the factory in Zagreb to the supermarket in Bihać.

(2) The international volunteer collective based outside the EU borders, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, was funded by private donations from wealthier Western and Northern European countries. With this private European money, volunteers financed the purchase of products for humanitarian distribution from local Bosnian supermarkets.

(3) From the hands of European volunteers into the hands of people on the move from Pakistan and Afghanistan, Croatian ketchup and mayonnaise would come packaged into game food packages crucial for the final phase of their long journey to Europe. Due to the criminalization of pro-migrant solidarity at the time, they would be clandestinely handed out during secret distro organized in hidden places. This event can be seen as the moment of the first appropriation of the products: a condiment usually consumed in fast food restaurants or in the streets becomes a main dish meant for consumption during the game in the jungle. The status of ketchup and mayonnaise was transformed from something you get with fries to a main course during the game – the products were, in a way, reinvented from below as a survival tactic (de Certeau 1984) with an emancipatory overtone.

(4) During the game, ketchup and mayonnaise found their way back to Croatia, but this time in an irregularized way. They were carried in backpacks on challenging and secret trails over mountains and green borders, across rivers, sometimes even through minefields – over territories referred to as weaponized landscapes by Hameršak and Pleše (2022).

(5) During the pushback, the food items passed into the hands of the masked group and the final phase of product transformation took place. From the testimonies collected in the mentioned report, it is evident that this sadistic act of torture was carried out as a kind of

internal performance for members of the masked group of attackers who had the role of both perpetrators and spectators at the same time. The act of explicit humiliation of the beaten people was recorded on cell phones and accompanied by singing:

The men told Amnesty International how they felt humiliated as militia rubbed mayonnaise and ketchup on their bloody heads and faces. One masked man squirted mayonnaise on an asylum seeker's trousers between his legs, while others laughed and sang "Happy Birthday" around them. (Amnesty International UK 2020)

It seems as if the described scene was an improvised intermezzo of the otherwise routinized and structured procedure of the covert pushback operation viewed as a whole. Dominance was asserted in a playful manner with elements of ludic subjugation, almost as if the dominant group was experimenting and testing the limits of their own power. From a psychological point of view, Christopher T. Burriss connects sadism with boredom, displaced aggression, and feeling good as "the conscious ultimate goal of sadistically motivated individuals" (2022: 107). As Burriss notes, through sadistic acts "the disrespected self has been elevated, at least in the eyes of the perpetrators themselves" (2022: 107), and game food became a convenient prop in their efforts of self-elevation. In this sadistic appropriation from above, survival food was ultimately turned into an instrument of torture.

From the perspective of a critical analysis of the European migration regime, it is more important to see this sadistic act as entangled with structural violence (Galtung 1969) of the European Union rather than as "displaced aggression" of a few individuals. Performative elements such as singing might refer to boredom and laughing might be seen as a sign of a "feeling good" moment, but these psychological features are important only insofar as they indicate the capabilities and characteristics of the very system that enables their performance. Subjugation staged with the help of ketchup and mayonnaise in the backstage of the migration regime reflects general political inequalities of European liberal violence – "a dominant form of EU border governance, which operates through racialised logics and is sustained through the concealment, displacement and denial of racial violence" (Isakjee et al. 2020: 8). The displacement of racially-based violence from urban centers of power to the periphery, beyond the reach of the public, is one of the key characteristics of liberal violence. Displaced anger, therefore, seems to be a common element of both definitions of sadism – as a psychological feature of the perpetrator and as a political characteristic of the regime. In other words: the fact that it was possible to carry out this violent act as part of the migration regime was not only a consequence of the psychological structure of the masked perpetrators, but also of the sadistic characteristics of the regime itself, which tolerates and normalizes violence on a structural level.

(6) At the beginning of the analyzed circulation of the products, ketchup and mayonnaise were contained within sterilized plastic packets and, at the end of the process, mixed with body fluids of unwanted, traumatized bodies, rubbed into them. Hence, in the pushback practice, the materiality of the objects was explored creatively and freely, but on the level of public discourse, it was denied by reducing them to unknown symbolism. By

calling mayonnaise, ketchup, and sugar into question on the semantic level, the Ministry of Interior completely dismissed the allegations of the reported pushback. Poor argumentation offered by the Ministry can apparently be summarized like this: the symbolism of the products is unknown, so the pushback (as whole) did not happen at all. Symbolic emptying of products as a strategy of decontextualization is an attempt to divert public attention from pushbacks as a thoroughly researched, but still hidden social and historical fact which, among other things, entails the denial of human rights, physical violence, psychological abuse, robbery and destruction of private property of potential asylum seekers.

By employing this strategy of decontextualization, Croatia participates in a broader European political process of “the obscuring of violence against migrants, through concealment, displacement – or even denial or ignorance” which “helps sustain the pleasant and uncritical notions of ‘liberal Europe’ and its civilisational pretensions, against which the uncivilised Other is drawn, and then violated, in Europe’s supposed defence” (Isakjee et al. 2020: 20). But even if we ignore this interpretation and continue to insist on the level of symbolism (offered by the Ministry), one interpretation is particularly difficult to suppress – covering people in gravy, like potatoes, quite obviously turns them into the main course served to the regime and ready for consumption.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, we examined material objects associated with irregularized migration, linking their museum and media representations with the experience-based knowledge of their use, that is, with field-based insights that contextualize them within everyday practices. Our ethnographic analysis of the materiality of these objects led us to reflect on the processes of appropriation from below and from above, which exist in a dialectical relationship.

Seemingly ordinary objects, such as ladders, ketchup, and mayonnaise, are used by people on the move as tools for softening the border. Ketchup and mayonnaise, in the context of solidarity and sharing between migrants and volunteers, represent appropriation from below. Ladders, on the other hand, circulated through networks of migrants and smugglers, embody forms of appropriation within the informal economy. Yet, both types of person–object assemblages are subsequently absorbed into the apparatus of control, becoming instruments of systemic and physical violence.

This reflection reveals parallel processes of appropriation from above: masked groups connected to border authorities adopt ketchup and mayonnaise for humiliating violent practices, while the very infrastructure of the fence – set in opposition to the ladder – absorbs their function within the logic of border deterrence and injures the crossers. Through these processes, we observe how material objects operate within complex power relations that shape the migration regime. This analysis helps us understand how objects, through their everyday use and transformations, become sites of struggle. By exploring

the mechanisms of appropriation – interwoven emancipatory actions and hegemonic reactions – we bring to light the often-invisible dynamics of everyday life under the irregularized migration regime.

Connecting these two sets of examples, we see how they reveal different yet related dimensions of performativity of border regimes. The fence and the ladder are mutually shaping forces, each knowing the other, producing a recurring cycle of crossing and obstruction. While migrants navigate these challenges creatively, the border authorities engage in the obstruction of movement performatively, signaling to EU audiences that they are responding to irregularized crossings (even though they know people will continue to cross). By contrast, the sadistic act of smearing food (that is essential for the crossers' journeys) aims less at a public display for external audiences and more at producing fear and humiliation among the crossers themselves. Taken together, these examples expose how objects operate not only as tools of crossing or violence, but also as performative devices through which different audiences are addressed – the publics of the EU states, on the one hand, and migrants, on the other. Thinking through these material assemblages highlights how ordinary objects mediate both action and meaning at the border, revealing the intertwined tactics of mobility and control, and the differential audiences addressed by the border regime.

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While we take responsibility for any shortcomings in this work, we note that knowledge production is never risk-free and can be shaped, co-opted, or even weaponized by the

very regimes that seek to control and illegalize mobility, potentially endangering spaces of solidarity.

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## LJESTVE, KEČAP I MAJONEZA: MATERIJALNOST IREGULARIZIRANIH KRETANJA BALKANSKOM RUTOM

U ovom se članku istražuje kako obični predmeti – poput ljestava, kečapa i majoneze – poprimaju političku dimenziju u kontekstu iregulariziranih migracija duž balkanske rute. Na temelju dviju etnografskih studija slučaja provedenih na jugoistočnim granicama Europske unije analizira se kako ti svakodnevni predmeti dobivaju nove funkcije i značenja u vezi s graničnim nasiljem. Ljestve, kojima se migranti služe pri prelasku ograde na srpsko-mađarskoj granici, cirkuliraju kroz neformalne mreže te postaju i sredstvo mobilnosti i sredstvo nanošenja tjelesnih ozljeda. Kečap i majoneza, koji se distribuiraju kao dio paketa za preživljavanje u sklopu mreža solidarnosti, izranjaju i u grotesknom kontekstu sadističkog nasilja tijekom pušbekova koje provodi hrvatska policija. Kreativna i taktička upotreba svakodnevnih, improviziranih predmeta od strane migranata odražava kodove strukturnog nasilja, budući da ti predmeti postaju ugrađeni u kompleksne režime kontrole i otpora. Ova dvostruka apropijacija – odozdo i odozgo – ističe materijalne međunose humanitarnosti, represije i utjelovljene agensnosti. Oslanjajući se na teorijske okvire materijalnosti, migracijskog režima i kritičkih studija granica, te prateći cirkulaciju i transformaciju tih objekata, pokazuje se kako se granice pregovaraju ne samo kroz politike i proteste već i kroz svakodnevnu uporabu i preoblikovanje predmeta.

Ključne riječi: iregularizirane migracije, granice, materijalnost, balkanska ruta, migracijski režim EU