

# BETWEEN THE CHANCE AT A BETTER LIFE AND ABANDONMENT: LOCAL RESPONSES TO EU BORDER REGIMES IN NORTH MACEDONIA

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**KAROLINA BIELENIN-LENCZOWSKA**

Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw  
Badaczki i Badacze na Granicy / Researchers on the Border

North Macedonia occupies a central position along the so-called Balkan route, which stretches from the Southeast Asia and Africa to Northern and Western Europe. The country has a long history of significant seasonal cross-border migration, connecting the region with the rest of Europe. It has primarily been a country of emigration, with a long tradition of mobility within the Ottoman Empire and Yugoslavia, and subsequently to Western Europe and other overseas destinations. In 2015 and 2016, North Macedonia became a transit country for around one million people and its transit role continues for a smaller number of people today. Drawing on ethnographic research, this paper examines local responses to mobility regimes and injustices using the example of two border villages: Lojane/Llojan and Tabanovce. It explores the changes to the natural and social landscape that create new connections and dependencies between migrants, non-governmental organizations, local residents, and the Macedonian state. I identify three factors that shape the narratives and practices of both the local population and the authorities: a long history of migration to and from Macedonia, a sense of abandonment by the state and international institutions, and the temporary nature of refugee centers.

Keywords: North Macedonia, border regimes, local responses, ethnography

## **BACKGROUND: MACEDONIA'S LONG HISTORY OF MIGRATION**

The Balkan Peninsula has historically been an area of seasonal cross-border mobility, connecting the region with the rest of Europe. It has also traditionally been a transit region

for the movement of people and goods, including smuggling. Located in the center of the peninsula, North Macedonia (formerly Macedonia) has primarily been a country of emigration. It has a long tradition of labor migration, first within the Ottoman Empire, then Yugoslavia, and later Northern and Western Europe and overseas destinations such as Australia, the USA, and Canada (Bielenin-Lenczowska, forthcoming). It is estimated that nearly one million Macedonian citizens live abroad, so transnational and translocal relations are important for the development of disadvantaged regions and for Macedonian economics and social life as a whole. Macedonian discourse also includes vivid memories of refugee children from northern Greece during the Greek Civil War of the 1940s, many of whom were of Macedonian origin. This history shapes perceptions, with the term “refugees” (*begalci*) often evoking associations with this period in particular. People travelling along the Balkan route are referred to as *migranti* rather than *begalci*. In 1999, Macedonia was also a receiving country, providing humanitarian aid to over 400,000 ethnic Albanians fleeing violence in Kosovo. This resulted in significant demographic shifts and heightened ethnic Macedonian–Albanian tensions within the country, culminating in an armed conflict in 2001. Although this conflict was ultimately resolved through the Ohrid Framework Agreement, there are still ethnic and national tensions in the country (Chudoska Blazhevskaja and Flores Juberias 2016: 219).

This paper reflects on local responses to changing border regimes at the margins of the EU. By “local responses”, I mean the actions of local authorities, residents, and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as Legis or Macedonian Young Lawyers Association (MYLA), in the context of life on the border and evolving border control measures. This concept is similar to the idea of “grassroots”, as described by Čarna Brković, Antonio De Lauri and Sabine Hess (2021). It encompasses various attitudes, ranging from welcoming to indifferent to hostile. At the heart of the grassroots humanitarian response, the authors argue, is “doing something” in various ways, “ranging from complex rescuing operations to occasional volunteerism” (Brković et al. 2021: 4).

Between 2024 and 2025, I conducted ethnographic research in two border villages: Tabanovce and Lojane/Llojan.<sup>1</sup> I interviewed local politicians and camp workers from the surrounding area and analyzed media discourse and NGO reports on the situation in Tabanovce and Llojan from 2015 to the present day. While in Tabanovce in March 2025, I assisted with running the transit camp as an NGO Legis volunteer and had informal conversations with local residents. It should be added that although I conducted my research in 2024 and 2025, most of my interlocutors referred to the period between 2015 and 2016. This was when the camp was established and when it had the largest number of residents. The period of the “long summer of migration” (Kasperek and Speer 2015) was a point of reference for my interlocutors in relation to the current situation as they made comparisons and pointed out the changes.

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<sup>1</sup> Lojane is the Macedonian name of the village, while Llojan is its Albanian name. Since the village is primarily Albanian-speaking, I use the Albanian name in this text.

Having conducted research in Macedonia for around two decades, I am fluent in Macedonian language and familiar with many local contexts. Now my research focuses on how local people in borderland areas experience life on the border, a concept that I interpret in multiple ways. Firstly, I examine the temporality of the border landscape (Leutloff-Grandits 2024), as well as significant moments for the local community relating to the opening and closing of the border and the construction of the transit center for migrants. Secondly, I analyze how the Macedonian state found itself in this situation and how its actions are perceived by the residents of border towns. I argue that the residents have been abandoned by state institutions and marginalized, left to fend for themselves in this and other crises. Their activities involving refugees are connected with the work of NGOs that engage the local community and religious institutions, including mosques. The region's multi-ethnic discourse is evident throughout, as the area is accustomed to people of different appearances, religions, and languages and has a long tradition of emigration.

## THE BALKAN ROUTE / CORRIDOR / CIRCUIT

The “long summer of migration” in 2015 was a significant period for the Western Balkans, as they became transit countries for thousands of people fleeing Syria and other war-torn countries. It is estimated that around 800,000 people passed through Macedonia between June 2015 and March 2016 (Chudoska Blazhevskaja and Flores Juberías 2016: 223). A country of only two million people was ill-prepared for such a large group of people. This posed challenges in terms of providing accommodation, medical assistance, food, transportation, and documentation. As an EU candidate country, North Macedonia had to implement a border policy characterized by significant changes since 2015, including violence, the construction of walls, and the segregation of migrants into those deemed worthy of support and those deemed unworthy.

Although migrants had been transiting through Macedonia since 2014, they remained invisible to the authorities and cut off from any kind of help. At the same time, a form of “informal transit economy” (Beznec et al. 2016: 17) emerged. NGOs highlighted that ticket prices for migrants increased dramatically, rising from €1 to €25 per person (Legis 2015). Nevertheless, from the outset, they were supported by local NGOs, whose volunteers helped them travel from south to north by rail, provided them with food, and lent them bicycles (Legis 2015). It was not until June 2015 that migrants began to be registered. They remained in an irregular situation, unable to use public transport or access medical care. Dependent on the help of organizations, they were also exposed to smugglers and violence. Only after pressure from local NGOs and civil society in June 2015, the National Assembly passed the Law Amending and Supplementing the Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection, which enabled refugees to notify a police officer of their intention to seek asylum within 72 hours of arriving in the country and granted them temporary free movement and use of public transport (Beznec et al. 2016:

18; Chudoska Blazhevskaja and Flores Juberías 2016: 225). Since then, migrants have been able to use local transport, particularly rail services. The Balkan route effectively became a corridor that “turned the active movement of people, which constituted the route in the first place, into a passive mechanism of transfer” (Kasperek 2016). While the corridor facilitated movement to some extent, it also limited it by forcing people to follow it (Hameršak et al. 2020: 9). The Balkan corridor was officially closed on March 16, 2016, but it had effectively been closed since November 2015. The restrictive admission policy based on nationality profiling, which began in November 2015, was further enforced by restrictions on the admission of Afghan refugees in February 2016, which culminated in the complete closure on March 16, 2016. It is estimated that at the beginning of October 2017 around 70,000 migrants were stranded along the Balkan route, mostly in Greece and Serbia (Umek et al. 2018: 41). Irregularized migration<sup>2</sup> continues, of course. In winter 2024 alone, 300 people passed through the Tabanovce camp each month.<sup>3</sup> The Balkan route has become more of a circuit, as people traveling through it move in different directions, sometimes back and forth, in search of new routes and opportunities to enter the EU (Stojić Mitrović 2022).

Another important context for understanding the situation in North Macedonia in 2015 is the so-called “Šarena revolucija” (Colorful Revolution). In May and June of that year, mass protests were organized across the country against the leading right-wing government, VMRO–DPMNE<sup>4</sup>, related to the publication of recordings of politicians from the ruling party. The recordings revealed connections between VMRO politicians and the justice system, as well as corruption and surveillance of citizens. Internal tensions, a high unemployment rate of around 25%, and politicians’ primary focus on staying in power meant that migration was not a priority (Chudoska Blazhevskaja and Flores Juberías 2016: 220; Domachowska 2019: 54). Furthermore, migration in North Macedonia is rarely the subject of research, possibly due to its widespread acceptance and normalization. Some research has been conducted on the Macedonian part of the Balkan route, but not by local researchers. The only exception is probably Rozita Dimova’s book on border porosity (2021), which touches upon the context of the long summer of migration in Gevgelija, on the border with Greece. Unlike in Poland, Greece, Serbia, Croatia, and so on, there is no dual role of the researcher and the humanitarian aid activist. The question why people on the move and irregularized migration are not the subject of ethnographic research in North Macedonia highlights the broader issue of what constitutes a “research problem” in anthropology in Macedonia. This issue requires its own research, focusing on the history and socio-political situation of science, particularly anthropology, but this is beyond the scope of this paper.

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<sup>2</sup> I agree with Marijana Hameršak who advocates use of the term “irregularized” rather than “irregular” migration, arguing that irregular migration is not a socially and culturally neutral phenomenon, limited by clear boundaries, and cannot be reduced to the issue of a person’s legal status (Hameršak 2022).

<sup>3</sup> <https://lider.mk/zgolemen-protok-na-migranti-tabanovce-kako-kluchna-tochka-za-tranzit/>.

<sup>4</sup> Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity.

## CHANGING BORDER LANDSCAPES: A VIEW FROM TABANOVCE AND LLOJAN

North Macedonia's northern border with Serbia is 102 kilometers long and mostly runs through mountainous terrain. The main border crossing is at Tabanovce, located on the north–south highway running through Macedonia. The nearest towns to Tabanovce are the Macedonian town of Kumanovo and the Serbian town of Preševo, both of which are about 10–15 km away. Tabanovce has a population of less than 900. According to the 2021 census,<sup>5</sup> 294 of the 817 residents identified as Serb, 241 as Macedonian, and 211 as Albanian. Llojan is an Albanian village in the municipality of Lipkovo, with a population of almost 2,000. The village of Llojan is located less than 5 km west of Tabanovce. The closest town is the Serbian town of Miratovac, located about 3 km away. However, there has been no local border crossing there for over twenty years, so residents wanting to reach Miratovac have to travel 20 km via Tabanovce. The mosque overlooking the village is an important place that will be discussed later in the paper. Llojan is a special place known for its long history of smuggling – not only of people, but also of weapons and drugs. The subject of Llojan's smuggling past and present came up regularly in my conversations. However, I do not want this to be the main topic of my analysis, especially since a lot has already been written about smuggling practices in the area. As I write below, narratives about smuggling practices in Llojan go hand in hand with discriminatory narratives about Albanians in Macedonia. In any case, a careful and in-depth analysis would require a longer stay in Llojan, gaining the trust of the residents and knowledge of Albanian, which is the main language of the inhabitants.

Both villages are agricultural communities where people still farm the land and rear livestock, primarily cows. Local farmers primarily grow subsistence crops such as potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, onions, garlic, pumpkins, zucchini, and cucumbers. However, most people now work in factories or in services in Kumanovo, and many residents have emigrated to larger cities or abroad. Both villages are experiencing a significant decline in population. During the Yugoslav era, people also worked in the Serbian city of Preševo. Preševo was also where people went to market to sell their produce. Since ancient times, the western part of the region was mined for marble, chrome, antimony and arsenic (Grčev 2000). Until the 1960s, there was an antimony and arsenic mine in the Llojan area that provided employment for many locals. However, the post-mining waste has not yet been safely deposited, posing a threat to the local soil and water.<sup>6</sup> Tabanovce has a free bus connection with Kumanovo, introduced by the town in 2021, which is important for local daily life and the local economy. By contrast, Llojan, which belongs to the municipality of

<sup>5</sup> Data from the 2021 census can be accessed at: [https://makstat.stat.gov.mk/PXWeb/pxweb/mk/MakStat/MakStat\\_\\_Popisi\\_\\_Popis2021\\_\\_NaselenieVkupno\\_\\_PodatociNaselenie/T1503P21.px/table/tableViewLayout2/](https://makstat.stat.gov.mk/PXWeb/pxweb/mk/MakStat/MakStat__Popisi__Popis2021__NaselenieVkupno__PodatociNaselenie/T1503P21.px/table/tableViewLayout2/).

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.radiomof.mk/zagaduvanje-od-starite-rudnici-opasnost-za-lokalnite-zhiteli-drzhavata-ne-naogja-nachin-da-gi-ischisti-teshkite-metali/>.

Lipkovo, only has private transport. The railway line that connected northern Macedonia with the south – which provided cheap transport from Tabanovce to Kumanovo or Skopje, the capital – closed in 2016.

When the transit camp was set up in Tabanovce in August 2015, it was located right next to the railway station and the Slanište settlement. Only part of the land on which the sewage treatment plant was later built was rented from a local landlord; the meadows on which the camp was established belonged to the state. My interlocutors from Slanište recall that local farmers used to graze their animals there before the camp was built. However, the most common activity was collecting herbs, or *bilki*, such as chamomile, thyme, and rosehips. Earlier, in July 2015, a transit camp, also known as a one-stop center, was established on the other side of the border in Preševo, Serbia (Umek et al. 2018). According to the Commission for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia, “the Centre is currently at a standstill due to the rationalization of costs”.<sup>7</sup>

The camp in Tabanovce is still operational and currently houses a container with six toilets, 29 residential barracks, and a large dining hall sheltered from rain and wind. Additionally, there are four barracks, housing offices, and warehouses. A makeshift playground is located at the rear of the camp, but no children have been in the camp for several years. In the center of the camp there is a concrete square where residents sometimes play football. There is also a basketball hoop. The permanent staff are employed by IOM, the Red Cross and Legis, and The Crisis Management Centre is responsible for managing the camp. Most of the workers are local residents. Importantly, the Tabanovce camp is an open camp (*od otvoren tip*), meaning its residents can leave without restrictions. During my stay, residents mostly went to the villages of Tabanovce or Llojan to shop or simply to spend some time there.

## “THEY ARE WAITING FOR THEIR CHANCE”: ON TEMPORALITY

People on the move, referred to by the locals as *migranti*, first appeared at the Macedonian–Serbian border in 2014. Or rather, they became visible in Tabanovce at that time. Previously, they irregularly passed through Miratovački Pat, i.e., through Llojan towards Serbia, in smaller groups. In 2014, the main route for people on the move ran alongside the railway line. They began entering the village in the summer of 2015. One woman recalls:

Syrians would come in groups, whole families with women and small children. Usually in the evening, they would come to the courtyards of the houses. We would give them food and water, sometimes blankets and clothes for the children. They would walk all day and would try to continue to Serbia at night. No one stopped for long.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://kirs.gov.rs/eng/asylum/asylum-and-reception-centers>.

The residents saw this as a temporary situation and knew that the migrants did not want to stay in Macedonia but were trying to reach Western Europe. “They are waiting for their chance”, my interlocutors say. *Si čekat svojata šansa*. The word *šansa* or “chance” appears in many statements and is important for understanding the local approach to people on the move. It reveals both the temporary nature of their stay in Macedonia and their desire to live better outside of it. In this case, *šansa* literally means “meeting a smuggler and crossing the border”. In other words, it offers people on the move the opportunity to enter the European Union as quickly as possible: *čim iskoči šansa, si odat* (as soon as they get their chance, they leave). However, *šansa* is not only about the opportunity to leave Macedonia, but also about the prospect of a better life in Western Europe. Macedonians are well aware of this, as many of them also seek opportunities abroad for a better life. In this sense, they are very similar to migrants from the Global South. They too are waiting for their chance and for a better life in their own country, although this wait seems permanent (see Veselinovič 2021).

Migrants started arriving in Macedonia by train in larger groups when the 72-hour temporary stay law was introduced. Two camps were opened in response: one in the north of the country in Tabanovce and one in the south, on the border with Greece in Gevgelija. Both were located next to the railway line and far from the town centers. Importantly, the architecture and names of both transit points indicated that migrants were expected to stay briefly and leave quickly (Dunn 2018; Oesch 2019). Both were referred to as “temporary transit centers”, with the direction of travel indicated: the Gevgelija camp (Vinojug Transit Camp) was labelled “enter”, while the Tabanovce camp was labelled “exit” (Legis 2015).

Not only were both camps designed for short stays, they were also completely unsuited for such a large number of people on the move. My interlocutors in Tabanovce recall that, initially, there were only a few barracks and toilets. Importantly, the Red Cross, which coordinated the camp’s operations from the outset, employed local residents to work there. “This was a deliberate move to calm tensions, familiarize people with migrants, and compensate them for the construction of the camp, the noise, and the rubbish”, said the then head of the Crisis Management Centre, the institution responsible for reception centers in the country. As a result, eleven people from Slanište alone were employed. When residents protested against overcrowding and institutional inertia in 2016, part of the road was paved with asphalt, a sewage system and treatment plant were built, and additional rubbish bins were introduced. New jobs were also created for local people. I write about the precarious nature of this work below; but especially at the beginning, it was an important source of support for local people as well as a way to mitigate potential conflicts. The asphalt and the sewage treatment plant also proved to be a source of support. “That’s also for the village”, said Lena,<sup>8</sup> referring to my question about the protests

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<sup>8</sup> The names of all interlocutors have been changed.

against the treatment plant.<sup>9</sup> “They say it stinks now, but when they were working here and getting paid, they didn’t think it stank. Now that their work is over, they say it stinks”. Indeed, there are significantly fewer people working at the camp now, due to fewer people on the move, but for the locals, this simply means job losses. At the same time, people are quick to point out that it was not the Macedonian state, but NGOs that provided them with jobs, asphalt, and a sewage treatment plant.

The construction of the camp and the systematic militarization and securitization of the border brought about further changes to the landscape of Tabanovce and the surrounding area, including the construction of a fence. In March 2016, construction began on a three-meter-high wire fence on the border with Serbia. This fence was never completed and locals say this was so that Aleksandar Vučić could appear on television and win the elections. Furthermore, the fence is close to – but not adjacent to – Tabanovce or Llojan. In Llojan, there is a narrow asphalt road blocked only by a pile of earth and wire laid on the ground. This demonstrates the porous nature of the border. People on the move do not need to jump over or cut through the fence, as is the case at other borders. However, the fence destroys the local landscape, and the people I spoke to primarily view it as an example of how much money is spent on militarization and the supposed defense of borders instead of on providing real support to citizens.

A particularly critical moment came at the end of 2015 and the beginning of 2016, when the Balkan corridor started to gradually close. The camp staff found out about the closure suddenly; no one had prepared them for it. The police simply received information that the camp was being closed down. Several hundred people were left behind the camp, right on the border in no man’s land, in winter. Fortunately, NGOs quickly provided tents and whatever other support they could. Once again, my interlocutors said that they were left to fend for themselves, abandoned by the state and the EU. “It was chaos,<sup>10</sup> but that’s what our whole country looks like. Everyone did what they could: some brought water, some brought blankets because it was cold, and we felt sorry for these people. But what else can you do?” said Goran, who lives just behind the camp fence.

During my stay in March 2024, there were between four and sixteen people from different countries living in the camp: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Somalia, Nepal, India, Syria, Morocco, and Egypt. Several of them experienced pushbacks from Serbia. The number of people in the camp changed from day to day – one day there were eleven people, the next four, and another seven. Usually, people stayed in the camp for two or three days, with only a few who required longer treatment or lacked the means to continue their journey and would stay longer. During my stay, there were three such people requiring specialist psychiatric treatment, which was not sufficiently available. One doctor and one nurse

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<sup>9</sup> <https://kumanovonews.mk/vesti/da-se-dislocira-precistitelnata-stanica-od-migrantskiot-kamp-bara-at-zitelite-na-tabanovce>.

<sup>10</sup> Chaos was one of the key words in discussions about Macedonia led by Jaro Veselinović in the town of Kriva Palanka thirty years after the collapse of Yugoslavia (Veselinović 2021).

worked at the camp every day. Patients requiring specialist medical care were transported to Kumanovo or Skopje by IOM workers.

## LOCAL HUMANITARIAN RESPONSES AND MORE-THAN-MUSLIM SOLIDARITY

In their writing about grassroots humanitarian responses, Čarna Brković, Antonio De Lauri, and Sabine Hess state that these activities are diverse, sometimes individual and sometimes organized around “doing something” (Brković et al. 2021). During my research, I observed such actions, which were sometimes very fleeting, minor, and individual, such as the mentioned distribution of water and blankets or informing an NGO. Religious institutions, including mosques, also provide assistance in a more institutionalized, yet still grassroots and informal way. For instance, in June 2015, the Kumanovo mosque took in around 3,000 people over the course of a week, then, these people were redirected to the transit camp in Tabanovce, which was being set up at the time.<sup>11</sup>

While closing the border did not stop migration, it did increase irregularized migration, making crossing the border even more expensive and dangerous. Llojan, a border town located in the mountains, has long relied on smuggling people across the border and it is often referred to in the media as a “smugglers’ village”.<sup>12</sup> In 2016, to provide protection for refugees using irregular migration channels, the NGO Legis<sup>13</sup> established an office in Llojan, a location where many refugees cross the border with the help of smugglers. Several people from Llojan – who not only know the area, but are also trusted by the local residents and speak Albanian – are employed by Legis.

For people on the move, the mosque in Llojan, which towers over the village, is an important landmark. It has long provided assistance to migrants and refugees. One of my interlocutors, a Muslim man in his twenties who studied in Saudi Arabia for several years, says that he has always remembered seeing migrants in Llojan. In the early 2000s, they were Chinese; later, they were Romanians. He became interested in migrants in 2008 when around 100 people from Palestine, Algeria, and Somalia arrived in Llojan. He remembers that they headed for the mosque where they were given assistance, and then they set off towards Serbia. Since then, he has been one of the people who residents turn to with information that *migranti* have appeared in the village. The man speaks English and Arabic well, which is why he often works as a translator. For him, helping migrants is linked to religion, although he admits that he helps everyone, not only Muslims. Between

<sup>11</sup> <https://kumanovskimuabeti.mk/kumanovskata-dzhamija-stanuva-pretisna-za-branot-migranti-video-i-galerija/>.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.dw.com/mk/албанското-село-на-криумчари-очекува-муштерии/а-19033679>.

<sup>13</sup> Legis is an NGO established by Macedonian Albanians in Skopje. They collaborate in particular with local Albanians in Llojan.

2015 and 2016, people still used to sleep in the mosque in Llojan, but after July they built a makeshift camp in the forest (Legis 2016). During this time, migrants would stay in the mosque for two to three days and sometimes residents would take them in for a fee. “They even charged up to 20 euros per night. *Greota!* What a disgrace!” says my interlocutor. “These people are often sent back and forth between Greece and Serbia and robbed each time. Even some of our people rob them too”. Stories like this, about residents getting rich off the suffering of refugees are widely reported in the media and further reinforce the stereotype of Albanians in Macedonia as being involved in criminal activities. At the same time, this reinforces the sense of injustice and marginalization experienced by local Albanians, which is intertwined with a lack of trust in the Macedonian state.

When *migranti* arrive in Llojan, the local residents call someone from Legis or direct them to the mosque. According to a Legis employee, people constantly pass through, sometimes daily and sometimes every other day. Legis employees patrol the area and, upon encountering *migranti*, ask if they need assistance, offering food, drink, and first aid. Legis employees also ask if *migranti* wish to go to the camp in Tabanovce or seek asylum. They also check, where possible, whether they are victims of human trafficking. They do not call the authorities. When I asked about this, given my knowledge of other EU external borders, I was met with surprise: “Why? We don’t want the police here in the village”. It is important to note that residents have little trust in public institutions and state services. What is more, the inhabitants of Llojan belong to the Albanian minority in Macedonia. They trust the Macedonian state and its institutions even less. At the same time, many of them have migration experience and speak foreign languages, including Arabic, which is spoken by many people on the move.

While conducting field research one day, I travelled around the Llojan area with Amir, the humanitarian worker who showed me where he met eight people from Bangladesh that morning. Typically, someone from the village would call him to inform him of the people’s location. This time, it was the imam. Amir went to see the people, asking if they needed anything and if they wanted to go to the camp in Tabanovce. They declined and continued on their way towards Serbia. During my conversation with the imam, I learned that the mosque was always open to them. I asked if this was because they are Muslims. “No, it’s because they’re simply people”, he said, adding that mosques are well prepared to accommodate people overnight, with soft carpets on the floor and tap water outside the temple. At the same time, this statement shows that solidarity with migrants transcends religion, although many of my interlocutors emphasized shared religion, Islam. I agree with Robert Rydzewski that what connects people on the move from the Global South with the inhabitants of Tabanovce and especially Llojan is the shared experience of migration, as well as discrimination, insecurity, and abandonment (Rydzewski 2024: 27–58).

The residents of Llojan are used to seeing migrants walking from Tabanovce to the shop or strolling around the neighborhood every day, as well as those who try to cross the forest to Serbia or, more recently, Kosovo in the early mornings or evenings. In any case,

many of the residents of Llojan are migrants themselves or have family members living abroad. It is not unusual to hear German or English in Llojan and Arabic among those studying the Koran. Solidarity with people on the move is clearly visible in Llojan and is also emphasized by the NGO Legis. During my stay in Macedonia in March 2025, it was Ramadan. Regardless of their religion, camp residents received an *iftar* meal from the organization to be eaten after dark.

Residents of border towns usually encounter migrants briefly and do not have time to form relationships with them. People who worked in the camp from the beginning or dealt with people who stayed longer are an exception to this. They establish closer and deeper relationships and remain in contact with many migrants to this day, even though they are now in Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, or Austria. Let me provide two examples.

Ana has been working in the camp since 2015, initially as a cleaner and now in the camp's administration. She lives in a two-story house with a garden just behind the fence and sometimes, after work, we would go to her place for coffee. She would tell me about her experiences with migrants. "I met three Syrian women who are now like friends to me. All of them were without husbands: one was divorced, one was a widow, and one had a husband waiting for her in Germany. He had to flee Syria overnight. Each of them had three children. They met on the route; they didn't know each other before". These women arrived in the camp at the end of 2015. At that time, there was a huge crowd, and additional tents had been set up. There was a shortage of everything. After finishing work at 7 p.m., Ana would take the women to her place for coffee. They would do their laundry – there was no washing machine in the camp at the time – and take a shower, as there weren't enough showers in the camp. After the women left, Ana had brief WhatsApp contact with one of them. However, as Ana says, "she has found her chance (*si najde svojata šansa*) and is fine now". Ana had gotten to know the Syrian refugees well enough during their time in the camp to understand their needs, despite not knowing their language and them not knowing hers. She witnessed their daily struggles with insufficient sanitary facilities, washing machines, water, and food. Ana's example shows that small gestures resulting from observation and daily coexistence with displaced people can make a difference, but it also shows how unsuitable the transit center is for people staying there long term. In such situations, individual grassroots gestures are necessary, constituting what Elizabeth Dunn and Iwona Kaliszewska term "distributed humanitarianism" (2023).

This mismatch is even more evident in the second example, which shows people who are stuck in a camp because they cannot afford to pay a smuggler and require long-term healthcare that cannot be provided there. Marija has worked in the Tabanovce camp for five years; she commutes daily from Kumanovo. When I conducted my research in March 2025, she told me about her work. Although it was not her responsibility, she said that she wanted to help a boy who lived in the camp for over two months, had nowhere else to go, and was a citizen of an EU country. He ran away from home as a teenager, wandered around various centers, and ended up in the camp at the end of December 2024. Now,

with the support of a lawyer and the consulate of his country of origin, he should be relocated there. However, the procedure was ongoing for a very long time. This is due to the highly complex nature of IOM activities, which are in fact linked to EU border regimes. IOM offers so-called voluntary return to the country of origin, although in many cases it is not voluntary at all (Ahmetašević et al. 2023). This person's case, as well as those of two other men who were in the camp for several months during my research, requires separate consideration. Neither the camp's architecture nor the people working there are prepared for or qualified to deal with those who are "not able to meet their chance".

### **"NOBODY CARES ABOUT US": ON ABANDONMENT**

A key aspect of narratives about life in border towns is the feeling of abandonment by the state and international institutions, particularly the European Union. This was also observed by researchers conducting studies in Bosnia and Herzegovina on the border with Croatia (see, for example, Hromadžić 2020; Helms 2025) and in Serbia (Rydzewski 2024). Carolin Leutloff-Grandits (2023) writes that the countries of the Balkan Peninsula are "double transit". This applies to both the route taken by migrants, known as the Balkan route, and the political transformation and efforts of countries in the region to join the EU. North Macedonia has been a candidate for European Union membership since 2004, but it has only been visa-free since 2009. The country continues to struggle with high unemployment, corruption, and political instability. Jaro Veselinovič, who conducted research in the town of Kriva Palanka in eastern Macedonia in 2019, wrote that, thirty years after the transition, the country was still "entrapped in geopolitical limbo" (Veselinovič 2021: 207). My interlocutors do not believe that the EU could help them; above all, they resent their own state, which "only takes, rather than gives". Ilká Thiessen described a recurring theme concerning the 1990s in Macedonia: *vrzki*, that is "connections" (Thiessen 2007). This involves making informal arrangements for matters such as finding a job or arranging an appointment with a specialist doctor. Furthermore, jobs in state institutions, which are considered safer, can only be obtained by joining the ruling party. Despite publicly announced job competitions, it is only those with connections to the ruling VMRO party who "win". "But it was no different under the SDSM"<sup>14</sup> – said my research partners. According to Veselinovič's interlocutors, people are still waiting for changes promised by successive politicians. However, these changes are not coming and people are stuck in a kind of permanent limbo. Robert Rydzewski (2024) – who conducted research in Serbia, including Preševo, which is geographically close to my research area – reached similar conclusions. Rydzewski uses the concept of liminality, writing that it is not only people on the move who find themselves in a liminal state, stuck at the border. This is also true of countries through which they pass: they struggle to cope with the chaos, the influx of

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<sup>14</sup> Social Democratic Party of Macedonia.

people, and the desire to help, all the while demonstrating to the EU that they can secure their borders and thus be considered worthy members of the EU. Finally, the inhabitants of border towns are also in a sort of liminal state.

In Kriva Palanka, where Veselinović conducted his research, as well as in Tabanovce and Llojan, residents believe that emigration is the only viable solution. After all, it is a well-known and proven survival strategy that has been used for years. The villages I studied have been depopulating – in Slanište, for example, there are only 35 houses left, according to one of my research partners. Seven to eight of these are currently abandoned, and those that are inhabited are often home to only one or two people, whereas in the past they accommodated large families. If a family had a son, he would usually live with his parents and his own family. Today, this model has disappeared. One of my interlocutors said that Tabanovce used to be a large village with over 300 houses. In his day, in the 1960s, the school had 300–400 pupils; now, there are only a few dozen. The local clinic also closed and the post office is not open every day; older people used to pay their bills at the post office. The railway line and border crossing between Llojan and Miratovac are also out of service. Discussions about reopening the crossing have been ongoing for twenty years, but no action has yet been taken.<sup>15</sup> In 2020, Macedonia and Serbia signed an official agreement to open the border. On August 26, 2024, a meeting between the Serbian and Macedonian authorities took place in Preševo.<sup>16</sup> When I was in Macedonia in March 2025, there was no mention of any specific measures. Similarly, safe storage of arsenic and antimony remains a promise. Waste storage sites are left unsecured and one of the landfills is located right next to a school in Llojan. The residents say what they need now is clean water. One interlocutor in Tabanovce said that politicians only come before the elections: “They talk, take pictures and leave. They only remember us before the next election”. *Nikoj ne briga za nas* [Nobody cares about us] is a phrase I heard frequently during my conversations with the residents.

Stories about the state’s abandonment are intertwined with narratives about a time in the past that is perceived as better, safer or “normal”. Similar to Yugonostalgic narratives, they demonstrate how the dissolution of Yugoslavia led to the impoverishment and “backwardness” of Macedonia. In a column for the local magazine *Kumanovo News*, the former mayor of Tabanovce, Nenad Mladenović, writes: “Once an important economic and social center, today it is just another sad story of abandoned villages in the Kumanovo borderland region. We have excellent natural conditions: fertile land and rivers. We are hard-working, but that is not enough for a good life. What we lack should be provided by the municipality and the state, but they behave as if Tabanovce did not exist at all”.<sup>17</sup> In his opinion, Macedonia itself took a “step backwards” following the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

<sup>15</sup> <https://alsat.mk/mk/duri-i-po-20-godini-vetuvana-granitsata-lojane-miratovtse-ostanuva-neotvorena/>.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.expres.mk/средба-во-прешево-за-новиот-граничен-п/>.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.kumanovonews.mk/pogranicna-hronika/tabnovce-senka-svoje-proslosti-nadlezni-nemaju-sluxa-za-seoske-probleme>.

This is consistent with Leutloff-Grandits' argument that "borders can accelerate or slow down people movement" (2024: 160), which applies not only to migrants, but also to residents of border regions.

In such circumstances, the construction of a refugee center provided real support for the local population. A dozen or so people have permanent jobs there and, as they say, "If it weren't for IOM, there wouldn't even be asphalt here". Thanks to these efforts, there are very few stories of hostility towards the camp or its inhabitants. At the same time, as I mentioned, working in the camp does not provide job stability. All employees are hired on a contract basis, with contracts extended in line with the extension of the crisis (every three or six months). Employees are hired by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, and the contracts are financed by IOM. However, I learned that this is common practice in Macedonia and does not only apply to work for non-governmental organizations. My interlocutors have no illusions that, without funding from NGOs, they would have any work at all. In this particular situation, my research partners regard IOM as nothing short of a savior. However, it is difficult to view this organization's activities in the Balkans since 1999 (Ahmetašević et al. 2023) uncritically.

## CONCLUSIONS

Changes to the European Union's border regimes led to an increased militarization and securitization of its external borders. Nevertheless, despite the official closure of the Balkan corridor in 2016, people on the move are still looking for new ways to reach Western and Northern Europe. In this paper, I analyze narratives and practices relating to border landscape and changing border regimes in North Macedonia, a country applying for EU membership. I used data from ethnographic research conducted in two villages: Tabanovce and Lojane/Llojan, located on the border with Serbia. Since 2015, Tabanovce has housed a transit camp for refugees, employing mainly residents of nearby towns. In the conversations and observations I conducted in 2024 and 2025, the main point of reference was the period from 2015 to 2016, when the camp was established and the largest number of people passed through it. With the benefit of hindsight, we can now see how migration routes, countries of origin, and infrastructure have changed over the past decade. However, the sense of instability and a kind of permanent liminality seem to remain unchanged.

One of the key concepts for understanding the experiences of people on the move and local residents alike is temporality. The structure of the transit camp in Tabanovce clearly indicates that it is intended for short-term stays. Its residents are (or at least should be) there for a short time, waiting for their opportunity. Temporariness is also evident in the narratives of local Macedonians and Albanians, who are waiting for a better future, either in the European Union or in their own country. North Macedonia appears to be in

a perpetual state of suspension or transit, grappling with political instability, poverty, and corruption. The inhabitants of border towns feel abandoned by both this unstable state and by international institutions, and are left to fend for themselves. This article explores how the border landscape is changing and how the narratives and practices of the local population are connected to the region's long history of emigration and immigration. The region's history of migration made the movement of people the norm. For migrants and residents of border towns alike leaving for the European Union is often seen as the only route to a better life. Amidst these chaotic and difficult circumstances, the local population is striving to organize its life and support migrants in various ways. They achieve this by working for NGOs and through informal, individual gestures of solidarity.

So far, the EU border regime has been studied very little in North Macedonia. My text does not, of course, cover all the issues, but I believe that it makes a small contribution to existing knowledge. Several issues require further in-depth research. Firstly, changing border infrastructures and the inadequacy of procedures for people who have to stay in the camp for longer periods require deeper analysis. An example of this are people who require specialist and long-term medical treatment, especially psychiatric treatment, which is available to a very limited extent in the camp. Secondly, Llojan is a place historically and currently associated with smuggling. This topic has been treated rather marginally in my research, but it appears in reports by NGOs and the media and in narratives of the residents themselves. I believe that long-term, in-depth ethically sound ethnography could provide insight into smuggling practices without stigmatizing the inhabitants and labelling them in discriminatory narratives that criminalize their activities as being linked to the Albanian nationality. Thirdly, further research could focus on showing why border regimes are not an important topic of research in the social sciences and humanities in Macedonia. In the text, I argued that this is related to the normalization of mobility, but it would be worthwhile to examine how anthropology and ethnology have developed and are developing in Macedonia, what topics are being addressed, what research is being published, and what projects are being targeted for funding.

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## IZMEĐU ŠANSE ZA BOLJI ŽIVOT I NAPUŠTENOSTI: LOKALNI ODGOVORI NA EUROPSKE GRANIČNE REŽIME U SJEVERNOJ MAKEDONIJI

Sjeverna Makedonija zauzima središnji položaj na tzv. balkanskoj ruti, koja se proteže od jugoistočne Azije i Afrike do sjeverne i zapadne Europe. Zemlja je to duge povijesti intenzivnih sezonskih prekograničnih migracija koje regiju povezuju s ostatkom Europe. Sjeverna Makedonija je bila zemlja emigracije, s dugom tradicijom mobilnosti unutar Osmanskog Carstva i Jugoslavije, a potom prema zapadnoj Europi i drugim preoceanskim odredištima. Godine 2015. i 2016. Makedonija je postala tranzitna zemlja za oko milijun ljudi, što za manji broj ljudi ostaje i danas. Na temelju etnografskog istraživanja u ovom se radu proučavaju lokalni odgovori na režime mobilnosti i nepravde na primjeru dva pogranična sela: Lojane/Llojan i Tabanovce. Istražuju se promjene u prirodnom i društvenom krajoliku koje stvaraju nove veze i međuovisnosti između migranata, nevladinih organizacija, lokalnog stanovništva i države. Utvrđuje se postojanje triju čimbenika koji oblikuju narative i prakse lokalnog stanovništva, ali i postupanja vlasti – duga povijest migracija u Makedoniju i iz nje, osjećaj napuštenosti od države i međunarodnih institucija te privremenost centara za izbjeglice.

Ključne riječi: Sjeverna Makedonija, granični režimi, lokalni odgovori, etnografija