

# Structural Vulnerabilities and (Im)Mobilities Amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic: People on the Move along the Balkan Route, Posted and Agricultural Workers

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*The global Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the vulnerable situation of people on the move and other migrant groups at a time when the usual spatial routes were disrupted and mobility was restricted for much of the world's population. However, while mobility was halted for some groups of migrants (e.g., in reception centres), migrant workers faced somewhat contradictory treatment by different governments, reflecting the 'need' for migrant workers in certain sectors of the economy. The article provides an analysis of such paradoxes in European migration and mobility policies. It focuses on the situation of people on the move on the so-called 'Balkan route' and two categories of temporary workers in the European Union: posted workers and agricultural workers. Its main argument is that, despite hierarchies of different mobility practices, both groups remained largely marginalised and such inequalities made some populations structurally vulnerable in different ways.*

*Keywords: migration, people on the move, posted work, agriculture, Balkan route, Covid-19, refugees*

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**Introduction: the changed contours of migration and mobility in the European Union**

In recent decades, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, we have witnessed major, even paradigmatic, changes. These have been most evident in the dissolution of former socialist regimes and nation states, the transition to new economic forms and the accession of several nation states to the European Union. Although it appears that the European Union has opened up by implementing the principle of the free movement of people, capital, goods and services – the pillars of the European single market – it has also selectively closed itself to those perceived by governments and the public to be ‘undesirable’ migrants (Zavrtnik and Cukut Krilić 2020). Increased control over the movements of different populations is also possible due to the development of information and communication technologies, which increasingly turn the Schengen border into a technological border that distinguishes ‘legitimate’ from ‘illegitimate’ migrants. Moreover, the use of technological tools reinforces physical borders, embodying the paradigm of ‘violent borders’ (Jones 2016) symbolised by the use of physical barriers such as barbed wire. In this regard, it is not an exaggeration to point to restrictive and securitised migration regimes as one of the culprits for the increasing insecurity and vulnerability of people on the move. We are aware of the arbitrariness of the various categorisations of migrants, which are based on perceptions of the legitimacy of migration rather than the reality of individuals’ lives. In this respect, taking into account also the issue of ‘categorical fetishism’ (Crawley and Skleparis 2018) that has been used to justify policies of migrant exclusion and containment based on the problematic distinctions between a ‘real refugee’ and a ‘migrant’ and/or between ‘voluntary’ and ‘forced’ migration, we use the established term ‘people on the move’ to describe the various movements of people along the Balkan route. These people are generally granted neither the status of asylum-seeker nor that of refugee and this is reflected in our choice of terminology.

On the other hand, labour migration and mobility policies target specific groups of migrants and mobile individuals who are supposedly ‘needed’ for labour markets in European Union countries. For example, companies in the European Union send ‘posted’ workers to provide a service in another member state on a temporary basis. As defined by the European Commission (n.d.), a posted worker is ‘an employee who is sent by his employer to carry out a service in another EU Member State on a temporary basis, in the context of a contract of services, an intra-group posting or a hiring out through a temporary agency’. As such, posted workers are among the groups that remain in the member state where they work only for the duration of the provision of their service and do not integrate in the labour market of the state where they work. Their situation represents a certain contradiction between the principle of free movement of services, goods, capital and labour on the one hand and the European social model and established models of labour relations on the other (Vah Jevšnik and Rogelja 2018). Among temporary migrant workers in the European Union – for example in agriculture – underpayment, long working hours, inhumane working and living conditions and various forms of rights violation are also widespread (European Parliament 2021). We note that these policies, particularly with their emphasis on the temporary nature of various forms of labour migration and mobility, have contributed to the generally insecure and precarious status of migrant and mobile workers in the countries of the European Union, not unlike policies aimed at people on the move. In this sense, our main point is that Covid-19 has exacerbated structurally produced inequalities and vulnerabilities for both people on the move and migrant workers, although nation states adopted quite differential treatments of workers on the one hand, and people on the move on the other.

The Covid-19 pandemic further demonstrated that emerging diseases are always, in the words of Dingwall, Hofmann and Staniland (2013), sources of instability, uncertainty and even social crisis. As noted early in the pandemic, it became clear how the interlocking aspects of the pandemic exacerbated existing vulnerabilities and inequalities, with one of the groups particularly affected being people on the move, migrants and refugees

(Casaglia 2021; Fassani and Mazza 2020; United Nations 2020). The various aspects of the crisis related not only to their health aspects – namely the limited ability of these groups to protect themselves and maintain physical distance – but also to the socioeconomic aspects of their increasingly precarious living conditions and the restrictions on their movement and border closures (United Nations 2020). According to Casaglia (2021), borders and boundary lines have played an important role in shaping such asymmetries.

The theoretical part of the article deals first with the question of how borders are controlled and managed on the European territory, so that it is more or less desirable/legitimate for certain population groups to cross the borders of a particular nation state. Taking into account the socio-political realities in different nation states, we examine the changes in European border regimes that have led to the increasing securitisation of the European Union's borders, particularly using various digital technologies. We discuss the role that migration and mobility from the territories of Central and Eastern Europe have played in 'filling' gaps in certain economic sectors in the European Union. Despite this utilitarian stance toward migration and mobility, we point to concepts such as (il)legitimate mobilities and their embeddedness in broader debates about the proper composition of national populations that reflect the ongoing hierarchisation of certain patterns of migration and mobility. While the proponents of the new mobilities paradigm see the issue of movement as central to many lives and many organisations, they also expose questions around the intensity and the eligibility of different groups to move and also see the regulation of mobility as of central importance (Cresswell 2010; Sheller and Urry 2007; Urry 2000).

This article situates these changes in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, when the limits of the pandemic also became the limits of mobility. According to Düvell (2020), restrictions and even the suspension of mobility were the predominant responses to the pandemic in most European nation states. Nevertheless, we argue that measures to contain the spread of the virus consisted not only of immobility policies but also of mobility, in order to strike a balance between the preservation of public health on the one hand and the needs of the economy in certain sectors that the states considered 'essential' on the other. This sharpened the distinction between the legitimate and the illegitimate movements of the population.

The empirical part of the article draws on the data and semi-structured interviews with different professionals in the field of migration collected through the blog entitled *The Virus Knows No Borders* (Virus Nima Meja, [www.virusnimameja.com](http://www.virusnimameja.com)). The blog was created by the authors of this article and four students at the University of Ljubljana at the beginning of the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> The texts on the blog focused primarily on the changing notions of im/mobility and the hierarchies of different types of migration in the Western Balkan and Mediterranean countries in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. We also use secondary data from researchers and various stakeholders and organisations. In order to highlight pandemic-related changes in the mobility patterns of posted workers, one of the most 'mobile' groups of people moving for work, we examined selected data on the posting of workers during the pandemic, collected as part of the international project *POSTING.STAT - Enhancing the Collection and Analysis of National Data on Intra-EU Posting*. We focus on data for Slovenia, which is, relatively, one of the most important posting countries and significantly involved in the posting of third-country nationals, especially from the territories of the former Yugoslavia.

Based on the points of reference presented, we examine three examples that indicate the different treatment of certain groups of mobile people during the pandemic and that frame our main research questions. First, we present the situation of people who travelled on migrant/refugee paths along the Balkan route. The aim is to examine both the significant limitation of their mobility in refugee camps and detention centres and the structural vulnerabilities which they experienced in the midst of the pandemic due to the inadequate living conditions they faced. In the next part, the paper focuses on two groups of workers: agricultural workers and posted workers. While their freedom of movement was initially suspended, nation states soon resorted to various measures to maintain the 'flow' of workers in sectors that were considered either 'essential'

(agriculture and related activities such as harvesting and packing) and/or ‘deficient’ in terms of domestic labour (e.g., construction, which is one of the most common sectors in which posted workers are employed). We argue that the insistence on the temporary nature of their status has contributed to their structural vulnerability in certain nation states. Examining these changes in the context of Covid-19 leads us to some preliminary implications for future migration and mobility research.

### **Theoretical background: (im)mobility and hierarchies during the pandemic**

Even before the pandemic, control over the movement of certain populations was one of the most important features of the migration policies of most nation states. These relied on sophisticated information databases that allowed sorting between ‘wanted’ and ‘unwanted’ migrants (Scott, Odukoya and von Unger 2014). In this regard, mechanisms for classifying migration took effect at the borders of nation states, which had the power to construct hierarchies of particular groups of migrants. The European Union has fenced itself with such ‘e-borders’ since its inception (Allan and Vollmer 2018; Zavrtnik Zimic 2003), albeit most intensively after its largest territorial expansion towards the former ‘socialist East’. In this respect, the barbed wire on the border between Slovenia and Croatia and in Hungary is the most obvious example of such a paradigm of the securitised border. In such a perception, mobility – paradoxically one of the most characteristic features of the so-called global subject – is a luxury that the ‘other’ does not deserve (Kirtsoglou and Tsimouris 2016). As McDonnell (2020) argues, forced immobility and family separation are nothing new for millions of people. Many individuals and groups are routinely excluded and discriminated against under the global mobility regime; they are targeted by destination states’ externalisation strategies aimed at keeping certain (would-be) migrants in check and denying them freedom of movement. From this perspective, we should name restrictive and securitised migration regimes as one of the culprits in the increasing insecurity and vulnerability of people on the move.

Moreover, temporary labour-migration schemes increasingly feature forced transience as one of their main characteristics (Horvath 2014; Yeoh 2020). Horvath (2014) understands temporary labour-migration programmes as linked to power constellations and social inequalities, as they depend largely on the ‘global division of labour and the unequal distribution of resources and life chances between regions and countries’ (Horvath 2014: 156). One of the most prominent examples of such programmes are seasonal-worker programmes for labourers in agriculture. Given the increasingly restrictive migration policies, it is no coincidence that nation states base recruitment programmes for this group of workers on the temporary nature of their stay, resulting in a lower level of granted social and economic rights. Structural determinants of their vulnerability are also evident in the working and living conditions of this group: labour hierarchies are formed according to the type of work and ethnic or racial affiliation, as well as the legal status of certain groups – citizens are at the top of such hierarchies, while undocumented migrants are generally at the bottom (Cohen 2017; Corrado 2011; Holmes 2013). Moreover, agriculture is a sector that is strongly linked to the characteristics of physical space, quality of land, season and climate. The seasonal nature of work in agriculture is one of the additional reasons for the short-term and precarious employment of workers in agriculture (King, Lulle and Melossi 2021).

Furthermore, many policies and practices of nation states that receive migrants are still based on the notion of the national population as a closed system with shared linguistic, cultural and historical experiences and associated material conditions such as residence in a common territory and common ancestry (Kreager 2015). Such a notion seems difficult to reconcile with the idea of the free movement of people, capital, goods and services, which is considered necessary for the creation of a common European labour market to strengthen European integration (Kmak 2015; Knežević Hočevar and Cukut Krilić 2019; van Ostaijen 2016). However,

in the face of increasing austerity policies and the neoliberal dismantling of welfare systems, media reports and political statements project concerns about job loss and abuse of welfare systems onto migrants to create a moral distinction between the ‘deserving refugee’ and the ‘undeserving migrant’. Yet the media and political actors often perceive both groups as outsiders who threaten the well-being of a supposedly homogeneous Europe (Holmes and Castañeda 2016).

Shamir (2005: 208) defines globalisation as ‘a process constitutive of a global mobility regime that seeks to separate those substances (viruses, people and hazardous materials) that can cross the boundaries of particular social containers (e.g., national borders and gated communities) from those that cannot’. As discussed above, selective migration policies were already firmly entrenched in European migration policy before the Covid-19 pandemic. However, with the pandemic, the immobility of a large part of the population became a commanded and desired way of life. The limits of the principle of free movement now became apparent to a larger share of the world’s population, not only across the borders of nation states but also at their micro-administrative level. In this process, borders not only played a symbolic function but can also be seen as actual technologies and bureaucracies for containing human activity and managing social order (Düvell 2020). Nation states have reintroduced and expanded border-management practices in areas where they had previously been largely abolished (Radil, Castan Pinos and Ptak 2021; Ramji-Nogales and Goldner Lang 2020), such as in the Schengen area. However, these practices were not a complete departure from previous ones as, for example, nation states already used various practices during the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’ to suspend the movement of people along various migration routes (such as the Balkan route) or to introduce registration practices even at the internal borders of the Schengen area (Kogovšek Šalamon 2016). Especially for third-country nationals who are not residents of the European Union, border closures have a significant impact on their living conditions – several states have also adopted national measures restricting access to asylum and the right to enter and leave reception centres and imposed a temporary registration freeze (Ramji-Nogales and Goldner Lang 2020). Such measures leave in limbo those who are the most vulnerable: asylum-seekers and irregular migrants (Triandafyllidou 2020), who now are seen to pose both a security and a health threat. Recognising the historical continuities and trends underlying such developments, Tazzioli and Stierl (2021) argue that the pandemic has only accelerated already existing tendencies to contain and detain migrants. It is true that restricting access to asylum, portraying asylum-seekers as a security threat and a threat to local and national economies, and constructing ‘economic migrants’ to pose as ‘political migrants’ were common practices in migration policy even before the pandemic (Kisiara 2015). Various actors therefore justified them by protecting the security of migrants and citizens. According to Tazzioli and Stierl (2021), the pandemic also reinforced existing deterrence measures and access to asylum as part of sanitary biopolitical and spatial tactics. In this context, Radil, Castan Pinos and Ptak (2021) contend that, in the context where the focus was on controlling the movement of people to stop the spread of the virus, border management was among the most important policy tools to ostensibly contain public health risks and ensure national security. As Casaglia (2021) notes, the tension between inclusion and exclusion in relation to the movement of people and goods is increasingly taking shape, leading to global inequalities in mobility and demonstrating the impact of border closures and differential inclusion on particularly vulnerable populations. Mobility as such has been subject to profound asymmetries and exclusions in terms not only of who could travel but also of who could afford to do so in the face of quarantine measures, testing costs and disrupted travel routes (Aradau and Tazzioli 2021).

Nonetheless, nation states have adopted different practices and measures to allow the entry of those groups of workers who were considered indispensable (Neef 2020). While, according to Shamir (2005), the differential ability to move through space and mere access to opportunities for such movement is an important stratifying force in the global social hierarchy, the differential treatment of certain groups of mobile populations during the pandemic was evident. The privileges, power, boundaries and hierarchies of

im/mobility were reshuffled (Ben Lazreg and Garnaoui 2020) but inequalities also crystallised during the pandemic through the enforced forms of (im)mobility and through the debates over who could work, who could not or who was pressured to work (Dobusch and Kreissl 2020; Schling, Espinoza and Datta 2020). Thus, while social positioning as mobile and immobile was redrawn to some degree, relational dependence on the socially reproductive labour of others remained central. In this process, the distinction between those who needed to be protected from health hazards (in this case, the native population) and migrant workers, whose labour contribution was more important than their health, created a differentiation and hierarchisation between bodies that were considered valuable and worthy of protection and those that were less valuable and potentially expendable (Bejan 2020; Dobusch and Kreissl 2020). The latter should remain on the territory of the host state only if their presence is necessary (Pécoud 2013). As Paul (2020) has analysed, at the structural level, intergovernmental agreements facilitated opportunities for people to travel as essential workers, even in the early days of the pandemic. At the agency level, migrants also struggled to keep borders porous to some degree by first campaigning for repatriation and then for return to sectors that could not function without their labour.

Creţan and Light (2020) also emphasise that, during the pandemic, it became even clearer how much the economies of Western European countries depended on flexible and mobile migrant workers. As we point out in the next section, using the example of posted and agricultural work, Western European governments soon realised that the exodus of labour from Eastern Europe had left enormous deficits in certain sectors of the economy, such as construction, agriculture, services and care. In this regard, at least to some degree, economic priorities and concerns about the food crisis took precedence over epidemiological concerns. Aware of the contested nature of such patterns of mobility and migration, we next examine some of the changes in the structures of mobilities and their hierarchisation – in terms of, for example, citizenship, occupation, etc. – that became more evident during the pandemic.

### **Methods and data collection: virtual methodologies**

Considering the multiple aspects of pandemics, a group of two migration researchers and four sociology students at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, created a blog titled *#Stay Home. Migration, Refugees and COVID-19* at [www.virusnimameja.com](http://www.virusnimameja.com) (translated as ‘*The Virus Knows No Borders*’) at the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020. Its aim was to address the complexity of new migration and refugee routes at the time when borders became impassable for almost everyone.

Against the backdrop of closed national and, in some cases, even municipal, borders or neighbourhoods, we transposed our research to the virtual social world where contemporary digital communities of refugees, migrants, activists, researchers, locals and other actors created support networks for people on the move as well as professionals and experts working in the field of migration. Moreover, digital technologies, essential for the mobility of ‘digital refugees’ (Zavrtnik and Cukut Krilić 2020), became a truly crucial factor in the migration reality for isolated people in refugee centres along interrupted refugee pathways, such as the Balkan route, during the pandemic. Apps and various online communication tools thus became also our core methodological tools for conducting interviews and observing changes in physical space.

All original data were obtained via the internet, which allowed us not only to collect secondary data but also, most importantly, to talk to experts and activists working on the ground along the Balkan migration route, from Greece to Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia and the final destination in Italy or further west. Digital research methods based on the web connectivity of different actors in a given research area therefore allowed us to gain deeper insights into social processes in territorial units that were closed, inaccessible or restricted during the pandemic. Virtual research methods are already well-placed in social science research (see Hine 2005, 2012; Phillips and Plesner 2018) but their use understandably expanded

during the pandemic and offered insights beyond closed territories and closed borders in our research area – migration and refugee research.

Our data were assembled through semi-structured online interviews with experts, active debates on webinars, analysis of existing secondary data sources and statistical data collected as part of the POSTING-STAT project, focusing on data on posting during the pandemic period. We conducted six online interviews with experts in the field of migration and asylum policy working in different locations along the Balkan route.<sup>2</sup> We conducted one interview with a medical worker from the US working in a refugee centre in Greece, one with a journalist from Slovenia working in Greece and four with activists or professionals in close contact with refugees on the ground and/or involved in direct aid delivery in Italy, Slovenia and Croatia at the time of or before the Covid-19 pandemic. We conducted the interviews via Zoom, Viber, Messenger or phone apps or phone calls. The authors of the blog participated in four specialised online workshops/webinars that focused on the situation of migrants and refugees in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in different areas – on the Balkan route, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia; in the European Union and globally. The blog's short texts, reports and expert opinions present our key findings on the impact of the pandemic on refugees at global, regional and local levels. Secondary-data analysis includes academic literature on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on migration, reports and expertise from global actors in the field of migration and mobility regimes and their critical reviews and the broader academic literature in the field of mobility and public health.

The data collection using virtual methods took place primarily over a 2.5-month period, from mid-March to the end of May 2020 and was published from 7 April 2020 to 6 June 2020, inclusive. During this period, we published 23 different texts, either in their full original versions or abridged as reports, expert opinions and comments on the blog *#Stayhome: Migration, Refugees, and COVID-19*. Nevertheless, we continued to follow the discussions on this topic throughout 2020 and 2021. In 2021, data was collected from the POSTING-STAT project and the first author was among the project researchers.

### **Results: the ambivalence of (im)mobility regimes and new structural vulnerabilities amidst the Covid-19 pandemic**

To illustrate the paradoxes of (im)mobility during the Covid-19 pandemic, we present the results of our analysis in two sections, although the topics of people on the move and migrant workers in the pandemic era are in many ways strongly interrelated and overlapping. The first sub-section focuses mainly on the policy and institutional responses to refugee flows along the Balkan route in the context of the notion of the contagious 'other', while the second sub-section addresses the issue of mobile workers (agricultural workers and posted workers), focusing on the policies and public perceptions of (un)wanted migrant workers in the era of mobility restrictions.

#### *People on the move along the Balkan route*

The first social relation concerns the new realities of mobility regimes, demonstrating in practise how migration and asylum public policies and institutions respond to the new global reality of disrupted mobility and changing asylum procedures. Our empirical research uncovered two fundamental problems: first, global (im)mobility and the associated increased vulnerability of refugees and migrants as they travel; and, second, the extremely limited access to asylum in most countries in the region. According to our interlocutors, the imperative of global non-mobility meant that people remained trapped in various unpredictable situations as they travelled, often without any, let alone appropriate, information. Globally, refugee centres were still

struggling with the problems that preceded the virus and that were now exacerbated. The overpopulation of refugee centres, for example in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece and Serbia, undoubtedly had a negative impact on the mental and physical health of their residents. Moreover, at the onset of the pandemic, three-quarters of refugees and migrants worldwide were stranded in areas where health systems were already overburdened and consequently unable to successfully manage the health crisis. According to our analysis, these were particularly Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia (Vovk and Andlovic 2020). Numerous reports from the UN, the IOM and NGOs shed light on the fundamental difficulties in maintaining hygiene standards in overcrowded refugee centres; the latter was already a problem before the pandemic and inadequate sanitary conditions worsened with its onset. One possible strategy to address the overcrowding problem beyond the pandemic is to relocate refugees to other centres with more vacancies in Europe that would ensure better sanitary conditions. Another, more permanent strategy is to settle their legal status (Perner and Zafošnik 2020) and thus provide access to health services. Both strategies address the broader issue of solidarity and social cohesion among European Union member states and their perception of democracy.

Another issue that emerges from our data is violence in refugee centres. We found the latter, for example, in the centres in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bihać) and Serbia (Krnjača). Refugees are dehumanised and subjected to violent practices, while the organisations responsible for the centres in Bosnia and Herzegovina (IOM, UNHCR) did not actually provide clear answers to questions about human-rights violations. According to NGO sources, the perpetrators of this violence are often members of public institutions, private security guards in the camps and police guards at the borders and on the streets of the municipalities. Moreover, the practice of illegally returning refugees at the borders, known as pushbacks, along the Balkan route, including Italy, remains highly problematic. Hungary even went so far as to legalise these pushbacks (Cukut Krilić and Zafošnik 2020). On the other hand, NGO activities on the ground were severely limited, if not crippled, due to mobility restrictions caused by the pandemic and limited access to refugee facilities (Cukut Krilić and Zafošnik 2020; Perner 2020). Independent observation was difficult because journalists and activists did not have access to the centres or were accompanied by security forces and IOM representatives (Cukut Krilić 2020a). As a volunteer from the NGO *No Name Kitchen*, an organisation that supports refugees in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, pointed out in an interview, the Covid-19 pandemic left these people even more isolated, less visible and as a result, completely forgotten by both politicians and the media (Zafošnik 2020). According to a medical worker from the NGO *In-Sight* (Perner 2020), who works in a refugee centre on the island of Chios, a major problem faced by the Greek islands is the lack of staff. Due to the isolated location of the islands, volunteers are also unable to get to the urgent sites.

Another issue concerns access to asylum, a basic human right that must be granted to all without access restrictions. However, anti-immigrant discourse was prevalent in the public and government policies of most countries on the Balkan route even before the outbreak of Covid-19. With the proclamation of the health crisis, these practices have intensified considerably. To illustrate, with the proclamation of the state of emergency, it was no longer possible to initiate the asylum process or regularise residency in Serbia, while the army patrolled the streets, borders and areas surrounding refugee camps (Cukut Krilić 2020a). Another theme reflects the role of key global actors in managing migration. Here, the UNHCR, IOM and WHO play a particularly important role in responding to the health crisis (Vovk and Andlovic 2020). Global policy has focused on universal access to health services that include the prevention, testing and treatment of refugees. However, further analysis of the limited mobility of most inhabitants around the world shows that the activities of global migration actors during the pandemic had a restricted reach, as their mandate was territorially limited, which was clearly reflected in their presence or absence (Vovk and Andlovic 2020).

One of the main issues in the data collection phase concerns the position of the refugee as a potential disease carrier and the complex relationships on the public health–pandemic–refugee nexus. The question here is how



the existing coverage of migration relates to the coverage of health carried out by nation states. In this health policy, the firmly established demarcation of the foreigner as a potential disease carrier plays an important role. To illustrate the thesis that the public largely perceives refugees as a threat to the public health of the local community, we use the example from our study of a small tourist town in Greece. After the public learned of an increasing number of infections with Covid-19, the authorities imposed a quarantine for the entire region and sent several health workers to the local refugee camp. The public linked the panic surrounding the rising infections to prostitution, more specifically to local men who visited the camp to seek sexual services from refugee women (Lihtenvalner 2020b). We might view the general reaction that followed as a local epidemic of xenophobia and racism which, coupled with sexism, blamed the female residents of the migrant camp for the situation, thus labelling them as the contagious ‘other’ and attributing general responsibility for the Covid-19 infections to migrant women. The only expressions of solidarity towards the young refugee women and the only criticism of the local men came from feminist groups and some leftist politicians (Lihtenvalner 2020b).

This homogenisation of the local community towards the young refugee women clearly highlighted the limits of our imagined community as well as the intersections of gender, class and race, indicators that are important markers of social relations. Another important theme is the apparent discrepancy in public health concerns for refugees. In this particular case, involving the possible infection of local men, the authorities instituted mass testing and a high presence of health workers, in contrast to cases involving several hundred thousand refugees stranded on the Greek islands, particularly Lesbos, Chios and Samos. For these refugees, concern for their health during the pandemic remained a largely secondary issue.

As our interviewees told us, the situation is similar in Italy, especially along the northern border with Slovenia, where the authorities primarily ‘cultivate’ the rhetoric of border protection against refugees (Lešnik 2020). During our data collection, what was going on in the large closed refugee centres in Italy and along the entire Balkan migration route was quite vague. Indeed, Italy was one of the largest hotspots of the new coronavirus disease. However, this did not correspond to strong public policies that also adequately addressed the health of refugees and migrant workers (*ibidem*).

Slovenia was no exception in this regard, with its rhetoric of the constant rejection of refugees as part of government policy, which overlapped with public health issues and created the new social paranoia. As Vezjak (2020) shows, this is a psychopolitical process of refugee intimidation that has been ongoing since the refugee crisis in 2015, with the refugee portrayed as contagious in this propaganda. If someone is contagious, they must indeed be a refugee and, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the political connotation has been associated with ‘tangible’ biological and health contagion (Vezjak 2020). This further legitimises the myth of refugees as disease vectors who have typhoid and scabies and are now spreading Covid-19 (*ibidem*).

The wide range of public policy and institutional responses along the Balkan migration route provides insights into the practice of providing safe places and ways to integrate vulnerable people on the move into a shared safe zone. The theme relates to the broader problem of deepening social inequalities during the time of the pandemic, while making new distinctions based on implicitly racist and nationalist assumptions about the ‘carriers of the virus’. Populist mobilisation around the refugee issue has been prevalent along the Balkan route during the pandemic. While migrants bear the brunt of the harassment by the authorities, those who try to help, advocate for or report on the abuse of refugees become secondary targets. ‘Both international and local journalists reporting have been threatened or fined by police while documenting the situation along the Balkan route’, reports Lihtenvalner (2020a). However, while propaganda and misinformation also help to fuel resentment and mobilise action, civic engagement – both vigilante action and acts of solidarity and altruism – is usually motivated by what the public perceives as a lack.

In summary, political propaganda and simplistic reasoning regarding the role of people on the move during the health crisis are not only a tradition of populist political parties in Central and Eastern European countries

and the Balkans but are also deeply rooted throughout Europe and widely manifested in Western countries as well. This particular social problem reflects a long history and legacy of a ‘fear of refugees’ by the European Union and Europeans in general. The European public perceives people on the move as an ambivalent social reality (Zavrtnik, Falle-Zorman and Broder 2017). On the one hand, they are associated with fears of a threat to cultural identity and the traditional European way of life and, on the other, with the reality of shortages in labour markets in Western European countries – a topic which we explore in the next part of the article.

*(Im)mobility and Covid-19: workers in agriculture and posted workers*

Across the world, in various geographic contexts, agricultural employers are increasingly relying on migrant workers to perform arduous and demanding tasks in the sector (King *et al.* 2021). In European countries, this trend is related to the intensification of agriculture in some areas of Southern Europe (e.g. Spain and Italy) but the phenomenon is also observed in European countries where it is not as widespread. In Slovenia, stakeholders only sporadically mention the importance of migrant labour in agriculture (Kmetijsko Gozdarska Zbornica 2018) and there is clearly no research in this area. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food published information as early as March 2020 showing that agricultural labour, especially harvesting (particularly of hops, berries and vegetables), was under threat. Due to the measure to protect public health from the spread of coronavirus disease, the authorities cancelled all procedures for the arrival of seasonal workers in agriculture, especially those from Romania. They also called on students, the unemployed, younger pensioners and all healthy people who could work to answer their call and do seasonal work in agriculture. As the ministry stated, the response was satisfactory, as some people were even willing to work for free, so there was no need for foreign labour (Cukut Krilić 2020b; Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food 2020).

However, the ministry also emphasised that it would not interfere in the business relationship between the employer and the job-seeker, which also refers to the amount of the wages, as the Law on Agriculture establishes a minimum payment for seasonal work in agriculture. Labour law does not apply to ‘temporary and occasional work in agriculture’ and workers do not have the protection afforded to people in an employment relationship (Breznik 2020). The situation in Slovenian agriculture is symptomatic of the generally low level of rights that governments and employers grant to seasonal workers. Moreover, the discourse that ‘native labour’ should help national agriculture is not exceptional as, for example, the British government also called on locals to perform work in agriculture, especially harvesting (Beard 2020). Despite such calls, they organised flights of fruit pickers from Romania to the UK soon after the initial restrictive stance (O’Carroll 2020). Germany also allowed seasonal workers from Romania to enter the country in early April 2020 and organised charter flights to fly them there (Deutsche Welle 2020). However, host countries were not the only ones that made efforts to facilitate the entry of seasonal agricultural workers. The Romanian government also took a measure to exempt flights of seasonal workers from the ban on commercial flights to areas which it considered as ‘crisis areas’ in terms of the spread of the virus (Gascón Barberá 2020).

In a situation where borders were virtually closed to all and air travel was largely at a standstill, some EU countries, such as Germany and the UK, continued to ‘import’ large groups of seasonal workers from Eastern Europe, especially in agriculture. The authorities and employers largely carried out this process in disregard of basic physical distancing rules, both during the journey (especially when leaving Germany) and during the stay. In this respect, although they were mostly citizens of European Union countries, they were in a similar position to people on the move who are forced to live in inadequate and cramped accommodation. Moreover, they were often unable to comply with the rules of physical distancing when working in the fields (Cukut Krilić 2020b; Lagana 2020; Zavrtnik and Perner 2020). In this context, NGOs in particular have called for the legalising of the stay and work of undocumented migrants in agriculture in order to reduce the shadow

economy and exploitative practices in the sector (Cukut Krilić 2020b). However, it is still unclear whether or not the crisis Covid-19 has led to better working conditions and more solidarity with the group of workers on which our food system so crucially depends.

Another example of those working temporarily in another country is posted workers, who are sent by a company in the European Union to another European Union country to provide services. This type of work is especially common in the construction industry, where it has become one of the main forms of recruiting short-term temporary workers with lower wages and other economic rights. Researchers have identified numerous vulnerabilities of posted workers such as their temporary status in host countries, cultural and language barriers, insufficient union representation, inadequate living conditions, disadvantages in social and economic security and the overlap of migration and posting status, as many workers posted to another member state are third-country nationals (Danaj 2018; Dodi and Melenciuc 2019; Vah Jevšnik and Rogelja 2018). The issue of posting has attracted considerable political and media attention in Slovenia as one of the most important sending countries of posted workers. The posting of third-country nationals occurs mainly from Bosnia and Herzegovina but also from Serbia, Kosovo and other former Yugoslav republics. In this respect, the posting of workers to Slovenia is part of the already well-established historical, cultural, geographical and economic relations between these countries. Furthermore, bilateral agreements with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia on the employment of workers make it easier for workers from these countries to obtain legal residence and a work status in Slovenia and facilitate the inflow of workers across nation state borders. To examine changes in the mobility patterns of posted workers during the pandemic, we hereby rely on data from the project POSTING-STAT, under which we collected data from various statistical sources summarised in the national report for Slovenia (Vah Jevšnik, Cukut Krilić and Toplak 2022). Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, we observed an upward trend in the posting of workers from Slovenia to other member states in 2020. Compared to 2019, the number of Portable Documents A1 increased by 7 per cent and the number of people posted abroad increased by 6 per cent.<sup>3</sup> To illustrate, the total number of workers posted abroad in 2020 amounted to 60,503 persons, an increase of 6 per cent compared to 2019 and almost 15 per cent compared to 2017. Workers posted abroad accounted for 7 per cent of total national employment in Slovenia and even around 30 per cent of national employment in the Slovenian construction sector. In terms of the total number of PD A1s issued and people posted in 2020, the project findings demonstrate that the Covid-19 pandemic did not have a significant impact on postings from Slovenia. The quarterly statistics do demonstrate a decrease in the number of issued PD A1s in the second quarter (April–June) and in the fourth quarter (October–December), reflecting the peaks of the epidemic, but the total number of issued PD A1s continued to increase compared to previous years. The report also identified posting of third-country nationals from Slovenia as a persistent trend. In 2020, almost 60 per cent of posted workers from Slovenia were third-country nationals and the highest number and the largest share of third-country nationals posted from Slovenia were nationals of Bosnia and Herzegovina (23,051; 38 per cent), followed by nationals of Serbia (7,706; 12.7 per cent) and Kosovo (3,368; 5.6 per cent). Compared to 2019, the number of posted workers who are nationals of Bosnia and Herzegovina has increased by 21.8 per cent, from 18,925 in 2019 to 23,051 in 2020.

The analysis shows that the mobility and border crossing of temporary agricultural workers and posted workers were interrupted only briefly and that the border crossing of workers deemed necessary and/or ‘needed’ was soon possible again, which is evident both at the level of selected statistics and with examples from agriculture. Nevertheless, the vulnerabilities of this group of workers should not be overlooked.

## Conclusions: ambivalences about mobility and new inequalities

The article has addressed the changes in mobility and migration patterns during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The first topic related to the situation of people on the move, especially along the Balkan route. The Covid-19 pandemic put people on the move in an additional vulnerable position because the usual spatial routes were disrupted and the restricted mobility – i.e., the lockdowns of societies – further increased the insecurity of continuing the route – although, of course, mobility could not be stopped completely. We observed the structural vulnerability of this group at many levels. For example, they often live in cramped housing conditions and spaces without adequate and sufficient access to water. Hygiene items are in a constant state of volatility and insecurity due to the uncertain course of the pandemic. Moreover, they have limited access to asylum procedures and experience various forms of violence during their stay in the reception centres. In addition to the securitisation of their migration, they also experience a securitisation of their health, as various actors hold them responsible for the spread of the virus, which supposedly legitimises restrictive measures.

Second, we found an interesting – and indeed long-standing – ambivalence about mobility: some people were forced to stay (e.g., people fleeing or trapped in reception centres), while others – for example, coveted seasonal workers from Eastern Europe – were initially unable to reach Western European countries to perform their usual seasonal work. Nonetheless, governments in Western countries soon facilitated their arrival, so that the economies and sectors that rely on migrant labour could continue to function. Such a development points to the importance of the link between agriculture and migration, as the pandemic brought the issues of migration and agriculture to the fore (King *et al.* 2021). Moreover, our presentation of statistics on workers posted from Slovenia to other European Union countries confirms the fact that the halt in their mobility was short-lived and that economic activity in posting seems to have continued at a high rate despite the stringent measures in some other sectors.

Nevertheless, our examples have shown that the working and living conditions of workers in agriculture, as well as of people on the move, remain inadequate, as they are often forced to live in cramped and inadequate accommodation, without proper respect for the rules of physical distancing. Thus, when there is talk of blaming certain populations for the spread of the virus, it overlooks the fact that, in such conditions, it is impossible to behave in a socially responsible manner and in solidarity to contain the spread of the virus. In this respect, we could call Covid-19 not only a frontier but also a spatial crisis, where the importance of safe habitats comes to the fore. It seems that new spatial inequalities have emerged in the name of protecting public health.

Even in the later stages of the pandemic, it became apparent that there was some trade-off between public health and maintaining economic activity. The limits of the pandemic also became the limits of (im)mobility, which further entrenched selective border-crossing policies for people on the move and other mobile populations. Once again, this led to the marginalisation of already-vulnerable groups while stigmatising some of the previously privileged mobility carriers such as tourists and professionals.

Finally, Emily McDonnell (2020), returning to the question of reconfiguring borders in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, asks whether Covid-19 will eventually force us to rethink the global (im)mobility regime. Clearly, we could apply the concept of the migrantisation of the citizen (Anderson 2019) to the pandemic: immigration controls during the pandemic clearly affected citizens of certain nation states – and support for non-citizens (expressed, for example, in the criminalisation of solidarity) created further opportunities for the processes of informal and formal exclusion of citizens. Moreover, some of the measures that were once commonplace in reception centres, such as quarantine and self-isolation, are now ‘standard’ for citizens in many member states as well. Border management practices in the name of public health have spread across different spatial scales. The use of digital technologies to monitor population movements not only across the borders of nation states but also across administrative units and even public spaces is becoming increasingly important. Such technologies raise numerous ethical, legal and other social issues related to privacy,

surveillance, freedom of movement, discrimination and fairness that also deserve further attention in migration and mobility research.

## Notes

1. The student researchers were Klara Andlovic, Špela Perner, Špela Vovk and Anja Zafošnik, whom we thank for their input and contributions.
2. Some of the conversations we use here as primary sources were published in whole or in part on the blog <https://virusnimameja.com/> – such as the interview with a medical professional and an activist – while we obtained other data from online interviews. The latter are documented on the blog in the form of several author texts (e.g., on the importance of NGOs in Slovenia and the wider region, NGO activities in Italy, media coverage of refugees during the Covid-19 pandemic in Slovenia and Greece, etc.). We have published short articles mostly in Slovenian and some in English. For more details on the chronology of the interviews, see the methodological section of the article: Zavratnik and Cukut Krilić (2021), where we also publish some of the preliminary results of the analysis. See more at: <https://virusnimameja.com>.
3. A ‘Portable Document A1’ (PD A1) is a certificate proving that the social-security legislation of the issuing member state applies and confirming that the worker concerned is not liable to pay contributions in another member state (Vah Jevšnik, Cukut Krilić and Toplak 2022).

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No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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