

## Mapping In-Betweenness

### The Refugee District in Belgrade in the Context of Migration, Urban Development, and Border Regimes

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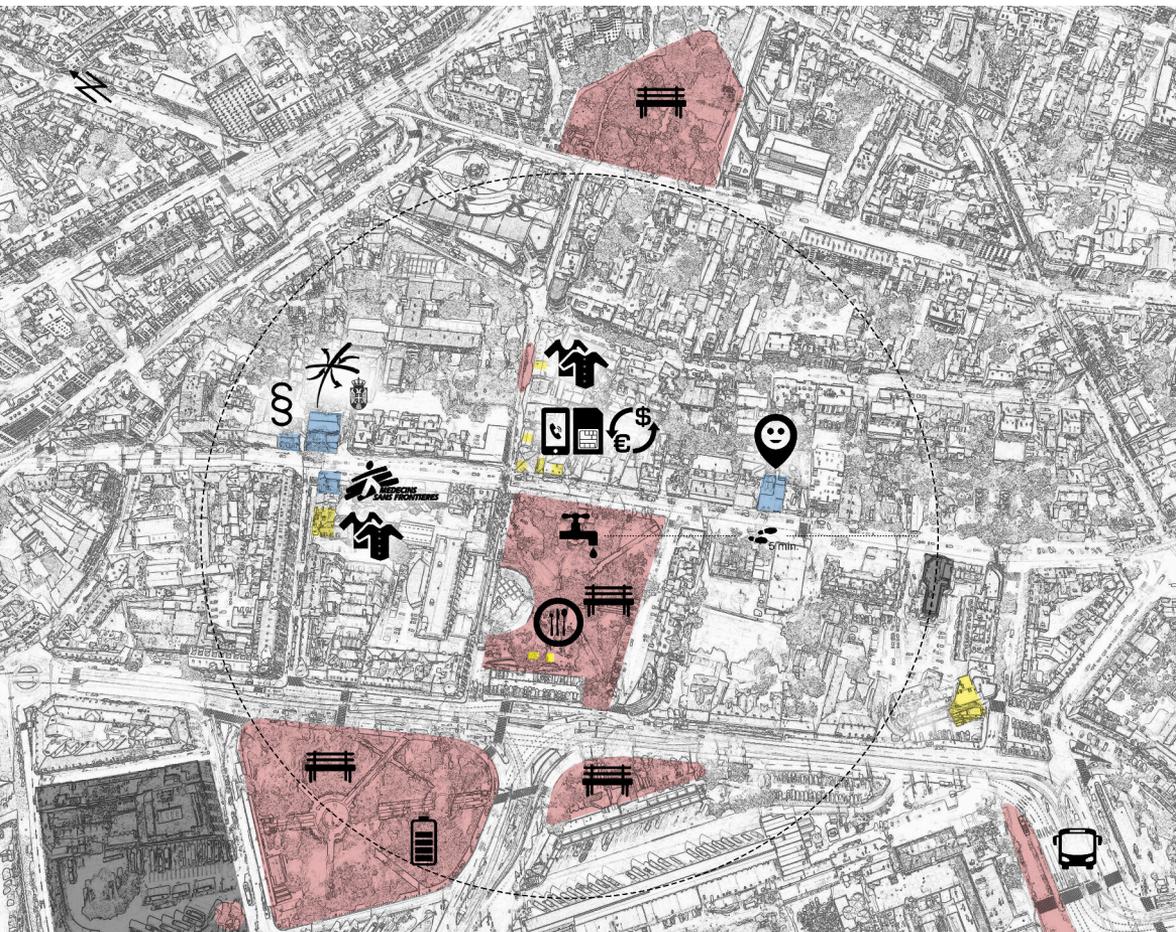
COSIMA ZITA SEICHTER, MIRIAM NESSLER, PAUL KNOPF

**Abstract:** The contribution explores the migratory situation on the Balkans and more specifically in the so-called *Refugee District* in Belgrade from a spatial perspective. By visualizing the areas of tensions in the *Refugee District*, the city of Belgrade, Serbia and Europe it aims to disentangle the political and socio-spatial levels that lead to the stuck situation of in-betweenness at the gates of the European Union.

**Keywords:** Balkan route, European border regime, mapping, migration, urban development

In December 2017 and September 2019, we visited Belgrade in Serbia, a country at the edge of the European borders. Both times, we researched the so-called *Refugee District* and faced a state of exception and normality at once; a situation that has been going on for years. As the European border regime is gradually closing its borders, instead of dealing with the actual causes of migration, a rising number of people on the run and migrating find themselves in a desperate situation. Coming from somewhere else, they are in search of a place in peace, safety, and better perspectives in Western Europe. In Serbia, they are living in limbo, waiting for a possible continuation of their uncertain journey that potentially will never be fulfilled.

We come from a German, *white*, and academic context. This background shapes the perspective we take for reflecting on our role within the EU in relation to the situation in Belgrade. In this sense, we are dealing with the question of how this stuck situation, which is especially visible and tangible in the *Refugee District*, could arise, and how it is produced and challenged by practices of refugees, the urban development of Belgrade, the Serbian migration management, and (inter)national and European migration policies. The *Refugee District* in Serbia, thus, serves as a starting point for decoding and disentangling the situation at this specific place outside of the EU but within the EU border regime from a political and socio-spatial perspective.



areas of stay



specialized retail



info point



benches



clothing and supply shop



Miksaliste - Commissariat for Refugees and Migration



drinking water fountain



food shop



free legal advice for asylum seekers



free charging station  
(out of order)



phone shop



Medecins Sans Frontieres



bus station



SIM shop



Info Park



former areas of stay



money exchange



five minutes walking distance radius

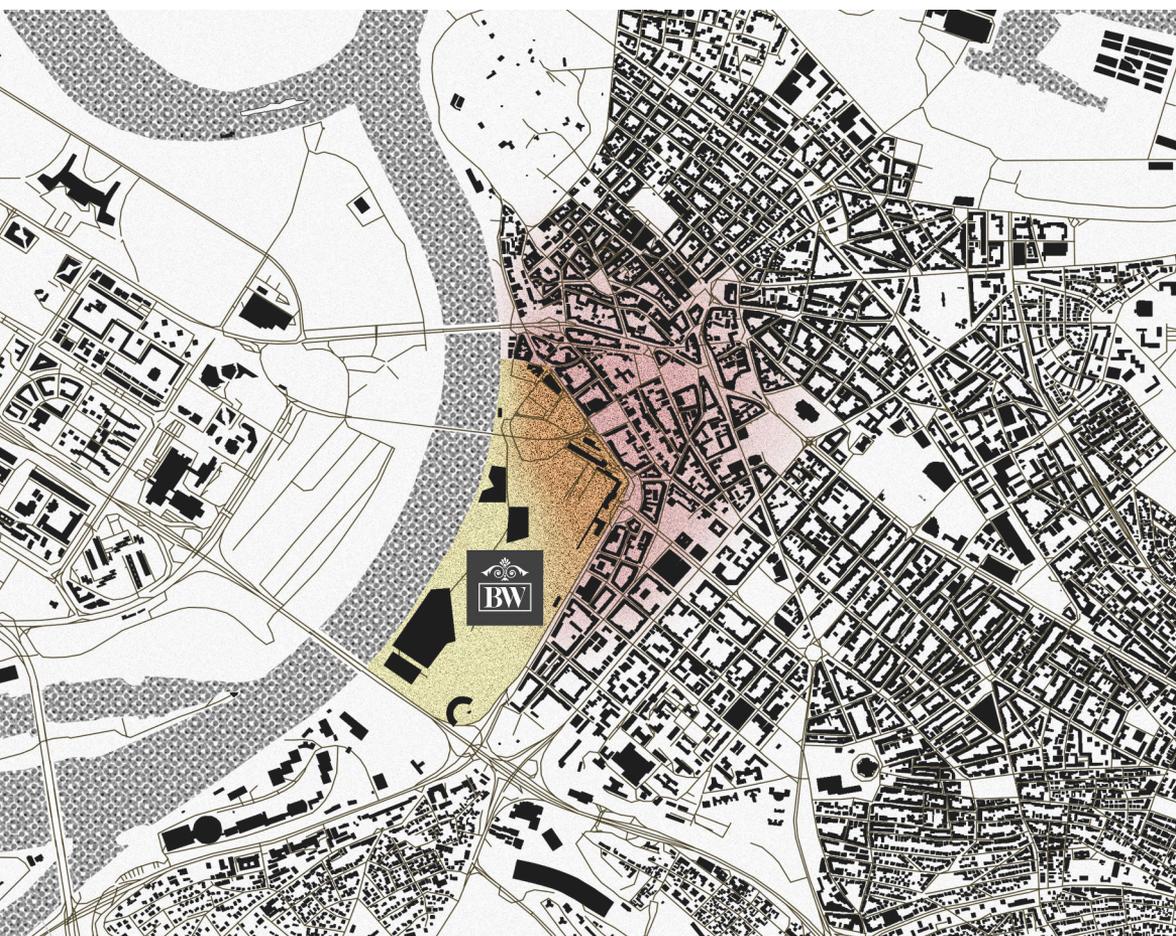
Map 1—Refugee District

REFUGEES IN THE REFUGEE DISTRICT BETWEEN DISPLACEMENT AND SPATIAL APPROPRIATION

The map shows the Refugee District at the end of September 2019.

The changes in the Refugee District refer to the previous research undertaken in December 2017.

The *Refugee District* is located in the heart of Belgrade, Serbia. Since 2014/2015, it became a hub for refugees on their route through the Balkans. Not only due to its close proximity to main transport facilities and related infrastructures supporting travel but also due to the location of many humanitarian aid organizations and even flight related services, the district functions as a place for refugees. It constitutes a space for information, networking, travel preparation, and for awaiting the ›game‹, the irregular migration towards the EU. Its physical structure, including parks with benches, a water supply, and abandoned houses facilitates practices of talking, eating, shopping, praying, sleeping, etc. But the refugees' practices and the supporting infrastructure are threatened by the demolition and decay of places as well as people being prohibited to use certain spaces. Also, the NGOs' work that includes medical treatment, information, free spaces, law advice, and more is restricted and controlled by prohibiting them to support people in the streets and those who are not willing to be registered. Despite attempts to restrict and regulate the infrastructure for, and the presence of, refugees in the *Refugee District*, refugees have been appropriating spaces in the centre of Belgrade for years: they have claimed their right to be there and to continue their journey towards the EU. They constitute a »non-movement« (Asef Bayat) for a global freedom of movement. The *Refugee District* can be seen as a condition as well as product of their practices, which is constantly undergoing changes depending on environmental, social as well as political processes on the urban, national, and transnational scale.



Refugee District



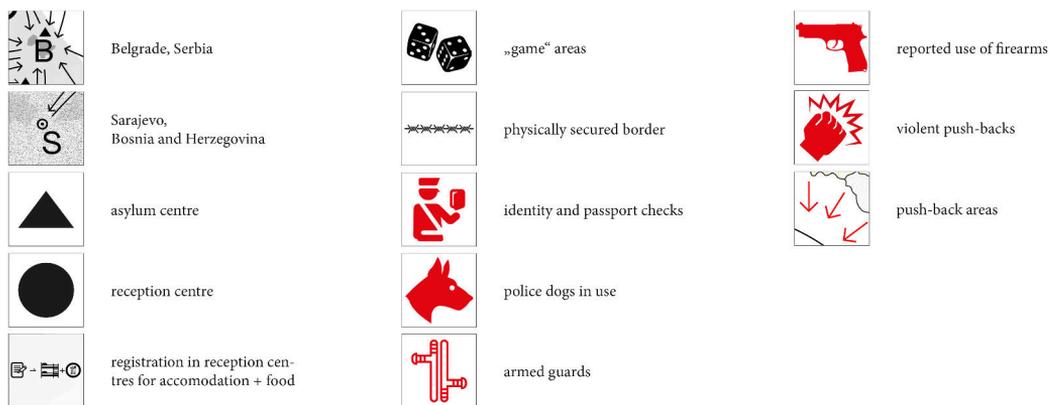
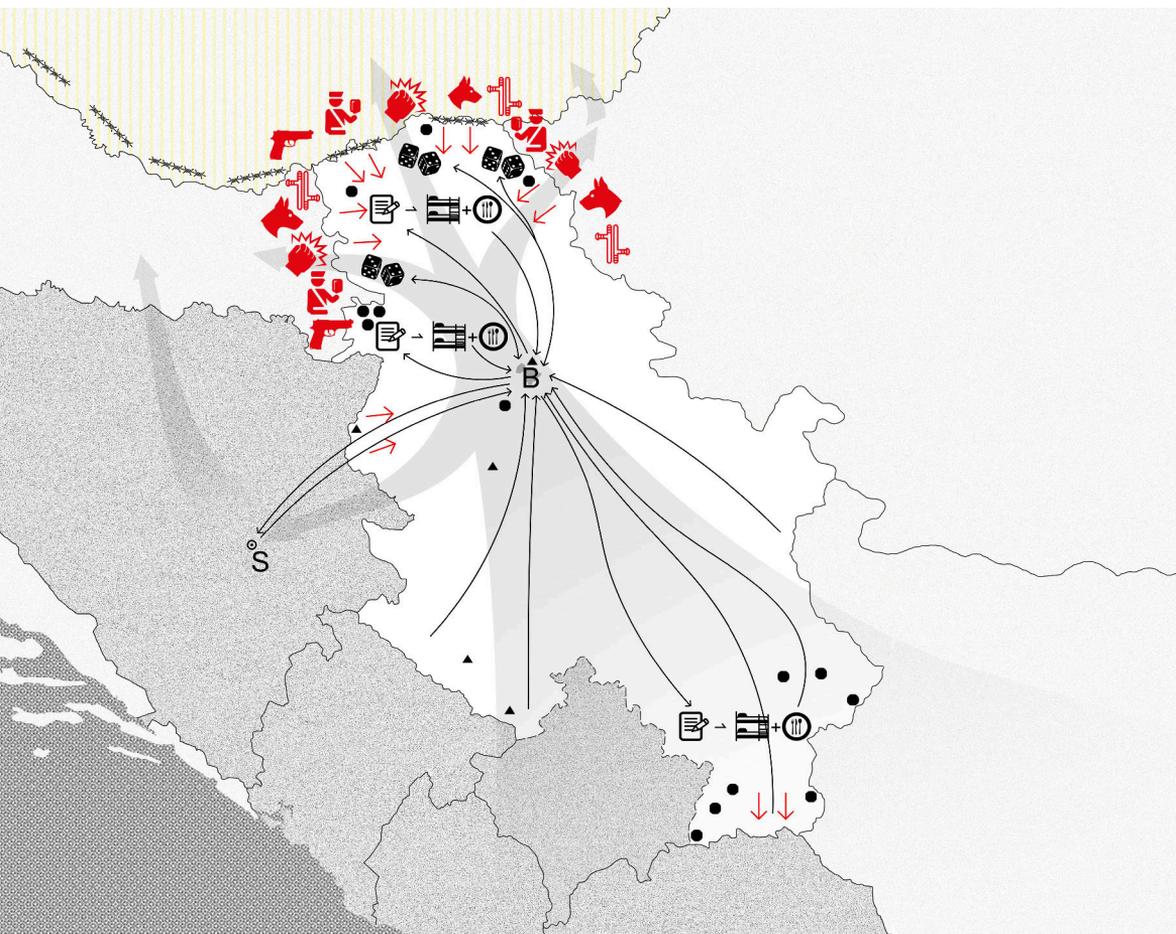
current Belgrade Waterfront  
development area

Map 2—Belgrade

THE REFUGEE DISTRICT AS A PLAYGROUND FOR NEOLIBERAL URBAN POLITICS: BETWEEN INVISI-  
BILISATION AND TEMPORARY NICHES

The map shows the status at the end of September 2019.

Looking at the issue from an urban level, the neoliberal development of the city politics inevitably becomes apparent. Belgrade, as a city within the context of globalisation and its competition between cities, is under pressure to expand and valorise its economic potentials in order to increase the private accumulation of capital. The current project *Belgrade Waterfront* is the dominating incarnation of this development. While step by step this megaproject in the city centre of Belgrade is planned and realised, refugees are passing through Belgrade. Their way of appropriating public space is classified as informal and precarious, which does not fit to the image of an entrepreneurial city and, hence, should be made invisible to the public eye. Their displacement in terms of space (e.g. through the demolition of inhabited abandoned barracks and houses or their expulsion from public space), society, and discourse leads one to presume an existing relation between the neoliberal developments and the intention to banish them from this area. The ongoing construction site and the ceased maintenance of spaces, though, constantly offer new niches. The refugees appropriate those places and thereby express their inevitable presence and right to freedom of movement. Thus, the *Refugee District* shows that flight, refugees, and their spatial impacts cannot be rendered invisible in the city.



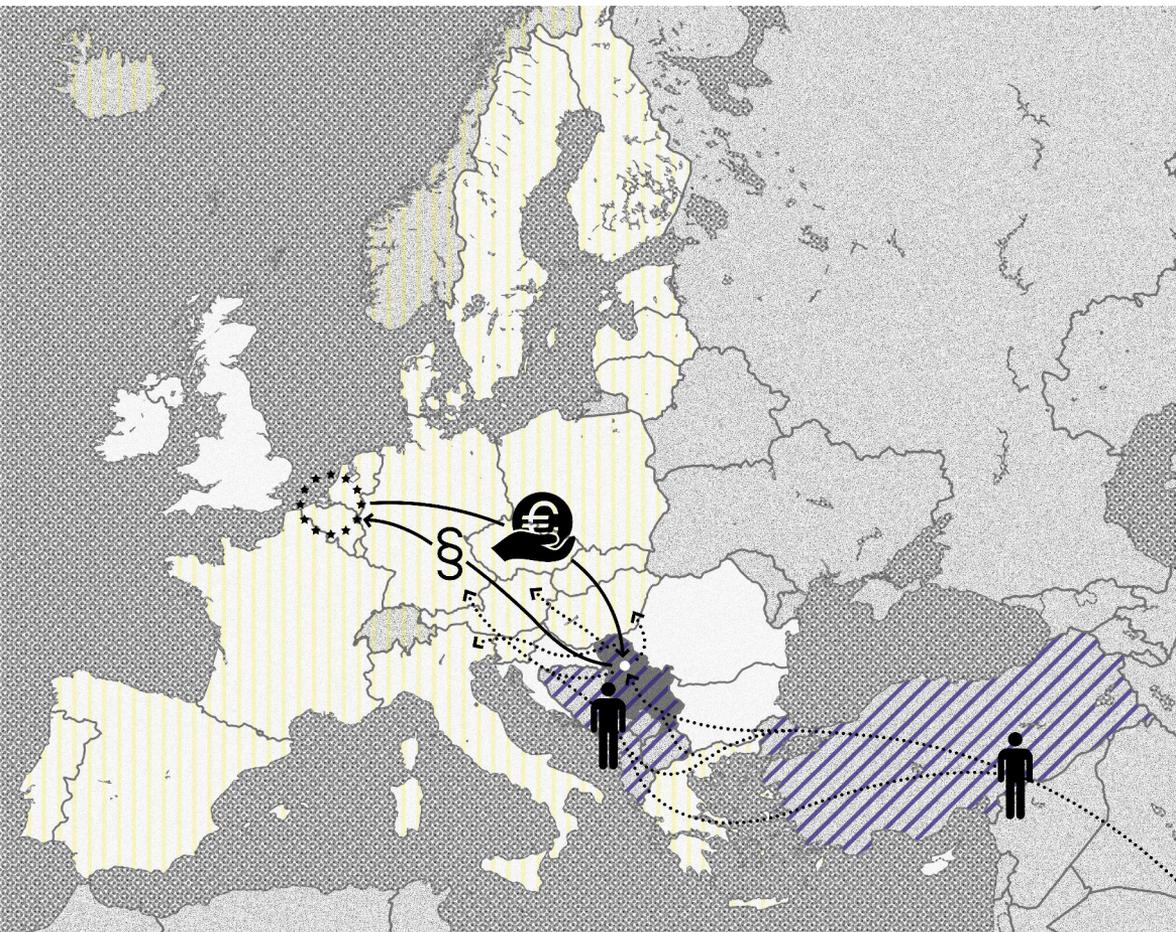
Map 3—Serbia

THE REFUGEE DISTRICT IN THE CONTEXT OF SERBIAN MIGRATION MANAGEMENT: BETWEEN REGULATING AND TOLERATING

The map shows the status at the end of September 2019.

This map focuses on the inner-Serbian pendulum migration between Belgrade, the reception centres, and the borders. In reaction to the recent changes of migration in the Balkans, migration flows to Sarajevo and Bosnia and Herzegovina towards the Bosnian-Croatian border were added. After failed attempts to cross the border due to push-backs, many refugees return to Belgrade and Serbia in favour of better formal and informal support infrastructures.

Serbia is perceived and positions itself as a transit country. It is, though, not experienced as such by refugees who have to wait for months and even years in reception and asylum centres in order to proceed their journey to the European Union. The Serbian migration management reacted—with institutional and financial support from the European Union—with a closure of the EU's external borders. There is a tendency towards professionalising the management of migration (in terms of accommodation, integration measures, such as the schooling of children, etc.). Within this context of migration management, the *Refugee District*, as a hub for migration on the Balkan route, serves as a central place for registering and transferring people into governmental structures. Therefore, Serbia has expressed the need to control the flow of information, which can be observed in governmental actions restricting places and activities of self-organisation between refugees and other people as well as with the take-over of the formerly privately-run NGO *Miksalište* in the district by the Serbian government. The *Refugee District* equally constitutes a place of departure for the ›game‹, for those who try to cross the border irregularly. In the context of Serbian migration management, pictures of refugees and a state of crisis help to uphold international financial support. Only by ignoring the ›game‹ and the *Refugee District's* central role in it, transit can remain possible for refugees and, consequently, Serbia's position as a transit country. Its positioning as a transit country is further enabled by the increasing role of Bosnia and Herzegovina as an entering point to Croatia since 2018. People try the ›game‹ via Bosnia and Herzegovina and even come back to Serbia because the accommodation structures are better. Within this context, the *Refugee District* still serves as a hub in this enlarged space of informal mobility in the Balkans.



Schengen area



EU candidate countries



non EU countries



EU countries



migration route to the EU



legislative changes in Serbia in favor of the EU, e.g. regarding migration management



EU financing the Serbian migration management system

Map 4—EU

THE REFUGEE DISTRICT AS A MIRROR OF POWER HIERARCHIES BETWEEN THE EU AND SERBIA

The map shows the status at the end of September 2019.

The route on this map only resembles the officially closed but still existing Balkan route. It does not give any information about the final destinations of the refugees after entering the EU.

Serbia directly borders on EU-states and is, thus, located between the countries of origin and destination countries of refugees—the Balkan route. This specific location impacts its geopolitical relevance: while the Schengen Agreement facilitates more and more freedom of movement within the EU, the need to isolate itself from the outside is increasingly regarded as necessary. Within the context of migration towards the EU in the 1990s, the term ›externalisation‹ was coined in reference to EU-migration policy. The EU systematically outsources border control and dealing with ›illegal‹ migration to local authorities and, thus, evades respecting civil rights by passing the task to others. The externalisation of European borders is often observed in relation to African countries like Tunisia or Libya, although similar practices can be traced in Serbia. In Serbia's case, the processes are highly influenced by Serbia's own interest in becoming an EU member state. Hence, during the ›formalised corridor‹—the temporal formalisation of irregular migration in participating countries along the Balkan route—Serbia was motivated to act in a relatively humanitarian way in order to present itself as an organized state respecting human rights. As soon as the formalised corridor was gradually closed by the EU, Serbia adapted its strategy and performed a ›securitarian turn‹. On the one hand, Serbia acts on its own behalf; on the other hand, the EU wants to codetermine how migration moves through Serbia. By securing the EU border by externalizing it to Serbia's territory via hard border technologies (like thermal cameras or a fingerprint database), push-backs, and financing the Serbian refugee accommodation and treatment, a huge border space was created in Serbia. Peoples journeys towards the West are limited on behalf of the European border regime and, thus, their freedom of movement. As Serbia itself is in the process of EU accession, it even does not shy away to make legislative changes in order to promote the process. This development has recently been enhanced through EU agreements with Serbia allowing Frontex to assist in border management in the near future. Hence, a correlation has evolved between the European border regime and Serbia that highly shapes the situation of refugees in the country and in the *Refugee District* in Belgrade.

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## Authors

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**Andrea Contenta** is an independent researcher and a humanitarian worker. After spending some years between Ethiopia, Kenya, and Sudan focusing on violence, conflicts and displacement, he decided to move to Belgrade following the Balkan corridor. Today he lives and works in Athens.

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Civil initiative **Info Kolpa** started in the spring of 2018 as a response to illegal actions of Slovene police, which started systematically denying people the right to seek asylum in Slovenia and pushing people back to Croatia. In the autumn of 2018, we established an informal telephone number for assistance to people wishing to seek asylum in Slovenia. The help we provided proved unsuccessful but with operating the number, we gained a lot of information on practice of push-backs on Slovene-Croatian border, which we presented to Slovene and international public.

**Teodora Jovanović** is as a research assistant at the Institute of Ethnography of SASA and a doctoral student of ethnology and anthropology at University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy. For her doctoral thesis, she conducted an ethnographic fieldwork in reception centers for asylum seekers in Serbia. Previously, she worked in »Miksal-ište« refugee aid center in Belgrade, and she was involved in »Refugees in Towns« project at Tufts University, Boston, as a local case study researcher.

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The **Push-Back Map Collective** is a transnational group of people that come from different fields of radical politics like feminism, anti-capitalism, and anti-racist struggles. Its members are active in documenting and counteracting push-backs and violence at the internal and external(ised) borders of the EU. One main goal of the mapping project is to provide a platform for transnational, non-hierarchical, radical grassroots interventions and exchange.

**Robert Rydzewski** is a PhD candidate at the Department of Anthropology and Ethnology at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, Poland. Formerly, he held a scholarship at the Central European University in Budapest and was a Doctoral Fellow Researcher at the Wirth Institute for Austrian and Central European Studies at University of Alberta in Edmonton in Canada. His scientific interests are migration, civil society, transformations of post-Yugoslav cities. Currently, he is completing his PhD dissertation about the migrant movement in the Serbian part of the Balkan route.

**Jack Sapoch** is an activist affiliated with the NGO No Name Kitchen, where he coordinates the collection of push-back testimonies. In this capacity, he works in the wider Border Violence Monitoring Network—a joint-project organized by independent NGOs—to draw attention to the issue of border violence in the Western Balkans. He received his undergraduate degree from Bates College (USA) where he researched the institutional influences affecting refugee assistance in the ›barracks‹ of Belgrade in 2017.

**Zita Seichter, Miriam Neßler** and **Paul Knopf** met each other at Bauhaus-University Weimar in 2017. Today, they are studying Art and Architecture, Urban Studies as well as Human Geography and Regional Development in Weimar, Berlin and Eberswalde. Besides being interested in border regime practices in Belgrade and beyond, they are involved in activist and artistic contexts, researching and teaching on Solidarity Cities, the Right to the City, transformation strategies from a decolonizing perspective as well as art and architecture in the context of the Anthropocene. Related publication: Eckardt, Frank / Neßler, Miriam / Seichter, Zita (Hg.) (2019): *Weit weg und unbeachtet. Stadt und Flüchtende in Belgrad seit Schließung der Balkanroute.*

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