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Journeys of Violence: Trajectories of (Im-)Mobility and Migrants' Encounters with Violence in European Border Spaces*

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Abstract: On their journeys to and through Europe, refugees and other migrants are commonly subjected to violence in its multifaceted forms. We argue that these "journeys of violence" are a direct effect of a fundamentally uneven and asymmetric global mobility regime that creates frictions and fragmentations in the European border space and beyond. Our argument is based on: (1) a state-of-the-art literature review on refugees' mobilities towards Europe and new patterns of involuntary immobilisation through border regimes, (2) a secondary analysis of recent quantitative data from the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP), which includes a large data set on refugee's journeys to Germany, and (3) original qualitative interviews that were conducted with migrants in Germany and Bosnia-Herzegovina. We will first show that mobility in the context of violence is highly selective and that trajectories of mobility significantly depend on mobility capital. Second, we consider the fortification of European borders and the externalisation of control regimes as facets of structural violence and demonstrate their effects on refugees' mobility, namely the fragmentation of journeys and the systemic production of situations of protracted immobility at multiple border sites. Third, we provide insights into refugees' exposure to and experiences of direct violence on their journeys, which must be understood as immediate consequences of the structurally violent conditions that govern their mobility and the cultural violence of delegitimising and illegalising refugees' movements.

Keywords: Refugee journeys · Encounters with violence · European border regime · Fragmentation · Immobilisation · Stratified mobility

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1 Introduction

Since 1993, more than 50,000 people have lost their lives or have gone missing while migrating *en route* to or in Europe, particularly in the Mediterranean Sea.[1] In Libya, tens of thousands of migrants are arbitrarily detained under dismal conditions. There is ample evidence of beatings, torture, forced labour, malnutrition, rape, and other forms of direct violence by the state and other armed and criminal groups (*OHCHR* 2018). From 2017 to 2021, the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) has documented almost 25,000 pushbacks of migrants across borders on Europe's fringes. Pushbacks are a violent and unregulated form of deportation by state actors that violates national, EU, and international law.[2] In Greece, around 103,000 migrants and refugees are stranded in reception and identification centres on the Aegean islands or in refugee camps on the mainland, severely constrained in their rights, including their freedom of movement.[3]

The journeys of refugees and other migrants to and through Europe are much debated in policy circles and in the public, and are also subject of an increasing body of scholarly inquiry. In these contexts, the conditions of refugees' journeys sometimes seem to fall out of sight. In this article, we focus on these conditions to highlight how refugees' journeys have become fragmented and decelerated and how they have been marked by drastic experiences of violence. The "journeys of violence" to Europe are, we argue, a direct effect of a fundamentally uneven and asymmetric global mobility regime (*Glick Schiller/Salazar* 2013) that creates frictions and fragmentations in the European border space and beyond.

We base this argument on a recent literature on refugees' mobilities towards Europe and new patterns of involuntary immobilisation (*Etzold* 2019), secondary analysis of quantitative data from the socio-economic panel (SOEP), which also includes a large data set on refugees' journeys to Germany, and qualitative interviews with refugees we spoke to in Germany and Bosnia–Herzegovina. In this contribution, we will first show that mobility in the context of violence is highly selective and that trajectories depend to a large extent on refugees' mobility capital. Second, we consider the fortification of European borders and the externalisation of control regimes as facets of structural violence and demonstrate its effects on refugees' mobility, namely the fragmentation and deceleration of journeys and the systemic production of protracted immobility at multiple sites. Third, we provide insights into refugees' exposure to and experiences of direct violence on their journeys, which must be understood as an immediate consequence of the structurally violent conditions that govern their mobility. Finally, we discuss migrants' vulnerability to

1 This calculation by Benjamin Etzold is based on the available data from the following sources: http://www.unitedagainstracism.org (1993-1999), http://www.themigrantsfiles.com/ (2000-2013) and https://missingmigrants.iom.int (2014-2021).

2 According to https://www.borderviolence.eu/statistics/, see also *BVMN* (2020) for detailed information.

3 According to https://migration.iom.int/europe/migrants-presence, for conditions see (*Tazzioli/Garelli* 2020).

violence, particularly regarding violent encounters with the state and armed actors in two different regions that are an integral part of the European border regime; the Western Balkan region and Libya.

2 Journeys of violence to Europe

2.1 Refugees' journeys

The actual experience of displacement and the journeys of people seeking protection are not given the necessary attention within research on (forced) migration that they deserve. According to *Gadi BenEzer* and *Roger Zetter* (2015), refugees' journeys and thus the pathways of becoming and being a refugee need more systematic examination. First, the journey into exile is much more than a simple movement from a place of origin via intermediate stations to a place of arrival. Rather, the journey marks a significant turning point in the life course of displaced people. Second, social resentments towards migrants and asylum seekers grow and more restrictive political decisions are made when migration "flows" or "waves" are presented as abstract dehumanised problems. Research on these journeys can contribute to making refugees' experiences – here, their encounters of violence – and perspectives better understood in public debates. Third, a more comprehensive understanding of refugees' routes, life trajectories, and decision-making processes could be used to improve policies and migration control in light of human rights and refugee protection (*BenEzer/Zetter* 2015: 302-304).

A growing number of scholars has investigated refugees' journeys, most notably with a regional focus on movements to Europe (*Collyer* 2010; *Crawley et al.* 2018; *Schapendonk et al*. 2020; *Etzold* 2019). The drastic experiences of different forms of violence during these journeys are highlighted in many academic contributions (*Martin* 2011; *Baird* 2014; *Krause* 2015; *Freedman* 2016; *Vries/Guild* 2019) and documented in numerous NGO reports. From the perspective of critical border studies, violence and death *en route* are direct consequences of a highly uneven global mobility regime (*Glick Schiller/Salazar* 2013) that manifest itself in states' bordering and ordering practices in border landscapes on the one hand, and in migrants' subversive border-crossings but also their immobility on the other hand. Violence against migrants disturbingly shows that territories, borders, and mobile subjects are constantly contested. Even more so, the – oftentimes violent – acts of bordering and the (im)mobilised subjects that are thereby produced are part and parcel of a global capitalist order (*Tsianos/Karakayali* 2010; *Mezzadra/Neilson* 2013; *Andersson* 2014).

2.2 Violent encounters *en route*

A concise analysis of refugees' journeys of violence requires an explanation of what we understand as violence. Scholars in peace and conflict studies consider violence as an inherent part of societal power relations (*Imbusch* 2003). Following *Galtung*

(1969, 1990), we apply a three-dimensional approach to violence on refugees' journeys.

First, violence is understood as practices by actors aimed at harming or hurting an individual or group by physical and/or verbal means. Assaults, killings, rape, torture, and detention are forms of such direct violence. Displaced people not only flee from the direct violence that they experienced in their countries of origin, but they and other migrants also face direct violence at multiple sites along their journeys; in the hands of smugglers, attempting to cross borders, encountering state agents or armed groups, or living in camps (*Krause* 2015). This observation led *Bank et al.* (2017) to the conclusion that displacement, which is commonly conceptualised as a linear migration out of violence, must also be understood as a violent process.

Second, structural violence manifests itself through injustice, exploitation, deprivation, and marginalisation that reflect unequal economic structures and power relations. Structural violence is a continuous process, rather than a singular event, in which the involved actors are often not immediately visible (*Galtung* 1969). Structural violence is evident in insecure livelihoods, exploitative labour relations, and the unequal distribution of rights and privileges between different groups. Unequal access to mobility, which manifests itself in highly selective visa regimes and borders that are porous for some, yet insurmountable barriers for others, and the fragmentation of journeys as a result of coercive migration management are prime examples of structural violence (*Vries/Guild* 2019).

Third, cultural violence refers to ideologies, discourses, and institutions that produce, maintain and renew violent actions and processes and "justify or legitimise direct or structural violence" (*Galtung* 1990: 291). This legitimisation of violence can result in the perception of existing patterns of both direct and structural violence as normal and inevitable. In the context of migration, cultural violence manifests itself in alarmist chaos-and-crisis-narratives of cross-border movements, which lead to the justification of ever-stricter controls and enhanced security at the external borders of the European Union in the name of reducing illegal migration and fighting smugglers whilst no legal and safe pathways to protection are open for refugees and other migrants (*Mountz/Hiemstra* 2014).

In this article, we not only apply the conceptual lens of refugees' journeys, but also use empirical evidence to highlight that refugees and other migrants who embark on journeys to and through Europe encounter violence in its multifaceted forms at multiple places *en route*, which in turn leaves deep traces in their lives. Journeys of violence are a direct result of a fundamentally uneven and asymmetric global mobility regime that creates frictions and fragmentations in the European border space and beyond.

2.3 The EU's migration management and border regimes

Border regimes work in divergent ways, smoothing "the mobility of some, while stigmatising and hindering the mobility of others" (*Schapendonk et al.* 2020: 2). Besides being rooted in certain discourses and institutionalised through policies and laws, border regimes include multiple actors and apparatuses of governance

and surveillance that are nominally designed to manage migration and to improve border control. Over the past 30 years, the EU and its member states have developed a complex system of migration management, which first and foremost seeks to regulate immigration into its territory and maintain states' sovereignty. The primary strategies are the militarisation of borders through high-security fences, increased numbers of border personnel, more sophisticated surveillance technologies, and the registration of arrivals with biometrical identifiers and in databases (*Andersson* 2014; *Shields* 2015).

The tightening of controls and the militarisation of the EU's external borders is one side of the coin. The other is the extension of borders beyond the EU's territory. This externalisation has been implemented through policies such as carrier sanctions for transport companies, bilateral agreements with states of origin and with transit countries to take back asylum-seekers that come from or passed through their territory, and comprehensive multilateral dialogues. The Rabat and Khartoum Processes between European and African states have, for instance, resulted in an increase in border surveillance and mobility controls on the African continent. Moreover, Libyan militia groups have been trained and equipped by the EU and its member states to stop "irregular migrants" from leaving for the EU (*Andersson* 2014). The EU's policies have been criticised for "seek(ing) to limit irregular migration regardless of the moral, legal and humanitarian consequences (… and for) reducing migration at all costs" (*Villa et al.* 2018). Migrants' greater vulnerability to violence is one of the inhumane costs of the fortification of the EU's borders and the externalisation of its migration management.

While violence has become a systematic element of the European border regime, migrants do not automatically fall prey to ever-new techniques of panoptical control, border fortification, and externalisation. From the perspective of critical border studies, migration is a movement "that possesses knowledge, follows its own rules, and collectively organises its own praxis" (*Tsianos/Karakayali* 2010: 378). People on the move are thus neither easily immobilised by multiple mobility restrictions as a facet of structural violence, nor are they helpless victims of acts of violence in borderlands. They are often able to subvert mobility controls, cross borders, and resist violent encounters based on collective action, shared knowledge, and mutual support (*Hess* 2017). While focussing on the factual reality of direct violence on journeys to Europe, the following sections nonetheless hint at migrants' agency and the collective power of the autonomy of migration in withstanding both immobilisation and violence.

3 Data and methods

We use both quantitative and qualitative empirical material to better understand the effects of the increase in border controls and migration management on refugees' journeys. The quantitative data stems from an annual household survey, the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP), conducted by the German Institute for Economy – DIW Berlin (*Kroh et al.* 2016a; *Liebig et al.* 2021). To account for demographic changes in

Germany, in 2016, the SOEP added a sub-sample of 4,527 adult refugees who arrived in Germany between January 2013 and January 2016. Based on the German Central Register of Foreigners, a stratified sampling design was used to include displaced persons who had different asylum statuses: 55 percent were asylum seekers, 35 percent had received a protection status, while 10 percent had been rejected but received a toleration or temporary ban from deportation (*Kroh et al.* 2016b: 6). While the SOEP interview focussed mainly on issues of arrival and integration, the survey also included questions regarding the journey to Germany and experiences of violence, upon which we draw for this article.[4]

The qualitative data is based on individual and group interviews with refugees in Germany and Bosnia-Herzegovina. In spring 2019, Rahel Lorenz conducted two focus group discussions with thirteen refugees from Turkey each and two in-depth interviews with Syrian refugees living in a city in Western Germany as part of her master's thesis at the University of Copenhagen (*Lorenz* 2019). All respondents were male, between 18 and 65 years old, and had gone to university in their home country. Benjamin Etzold has been involved in the EU-funded project TRAFIG, in which 50 semi-structured interviews and eight biographical interviews were conducted with adult refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and Eritrea, who are now living in Western parts of Germany (see *Christ et al.* 2021 for details on the methodology and results).[5] Moreover, our analysis draws on four semi-structured interviews and participant observations in the canton Una-Sana in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where migrants are frequently subject to state violence and have experienced pushbacks from Croatian authorities (*Themann* 2021).[6] Due to the very sensitive nature of the topic, in all three projects only few respondents wanted to speak openly about the journeys and their encounters of violence, although some interviewees shared their experiences quite openly.

Our empirical material provides insights on refugees' journeys of violence in times of increasing migration management. But refugees are not a homogenous group, and pre-migratory positionality impacts experiences *en route*. Our quantitative analysis therefore differentiates its findings by gender, as well as respondents' origins and financial background. The qualitative interviews add depth to the general trends by highlighting individuals' narratives. Together, the quantitative and

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4 We thank DIW Berlin – Deutsches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung e.V. – for permitting the use of the "refugee sample" (M3) and the "refugee family sample" (M4) data sets (*Liebig et al.* 2021) under data use agreement No. 4674. We used the data from 10/2018-02/2019 in our study "Pathways of Forced Migration to Germany: Social Networks, Mobility, and Experiences of Violence" at BICC, Germany. At the beginning of our analysis in 2018, only subsample M3/M4 was available.

5 Benjamin Etzold acknowledges funding for the project Transnational Figurations of Displacement (TRAFIG) by the European Union's Horizon 2020 programme under grant No. 822453. Besides interviews conducted by Benjamin Etzold himself, we used protocols of interviews conducted by Gizem G. Güzelant and Mara Puers in this analysis and gratefully acknowledge their contribution to our paper.

6 We thank Philipp Themann for his permission to use transcripts of his interviews and observations so that we could relate them to our own findings from Germany.

qualitative findings show how border regimes and individual strategies interact and shape refugees' (im-)mobilities and their journeys of violence.

4 Results

4.1 The stratification of mobility

For forcibly displaced people, external migration is often the last resort, as well as a response to the fear for one's life (*Etzold* 2019). But the potential for mobility is not equally distributed. Different degrees of mobilities and various governance regimes that structure mobility reflect highly unequal power relations across the globe (*Glick Schiller/Salazar* 2013; *Weiss* 2005). Therefore, "differential mobility empowerments reflect structures and hierarchies of power and position by race, gender, age and class, ranging from the local to the global" (*Tesfahuney* 1998: 501). These hierarchies of power and mobility are also reflected in our empirical material: the destination, conditions, and duration of refugees' journeys are shaped by their origin, access to travel documents, and in particular by their socio-economic position and available financial resources, i.e. their mobility capital (*van Hear* 2004; *Urry* 2012).

The SOEP survey covers information regarding transportation, accommodation, and smuggling expenses. Transportation was reportedly the most common expense, with a mean sum of 4,700€, followed by costs for smuggling with a mean sum of 5,800€. Accommodation was the least reported matter of expenditure, with a mean sum of 2,300€. In total, the mean cost of all three matters of expenses was 8,100€ for an individual. This highlights the necessity of having sufficient funds for travelling to Europe in the first place.

Sufficient money is essential for being able to flee at all. This was explained to us by two refugees who spoke about their journeys and their families' situations in Turkey and Syria, respectively. Kamal,[7] a Syrian who came to Germany in 2015 as an unaccompanied minor with his two brothers, explained that his family organised their departure from Turkey through the "mafia", paying $2,000 for each of them. After the three brothers arrived in Germany, they wanted to bring their parents and other family members who remained in Turkey to Germany via family reunification. As the procedure took too long, the relatives also embarked on an irregular journey through Greece and the Western Balkan states. Kamal reiterated that money was the deciding factor for their ability to quickly move on. Only the comparatively "rich" were able to leave Syria in the first place, then leave Turkey, and eventually come to Europe: "It cost a lot for us. (...) For all of us to come to Germany, almost $30,000 were spent. Because if we had not had the money, we would not be here." Khalid, another Syrian who moved to Germany via clandestine pathways, also tried to

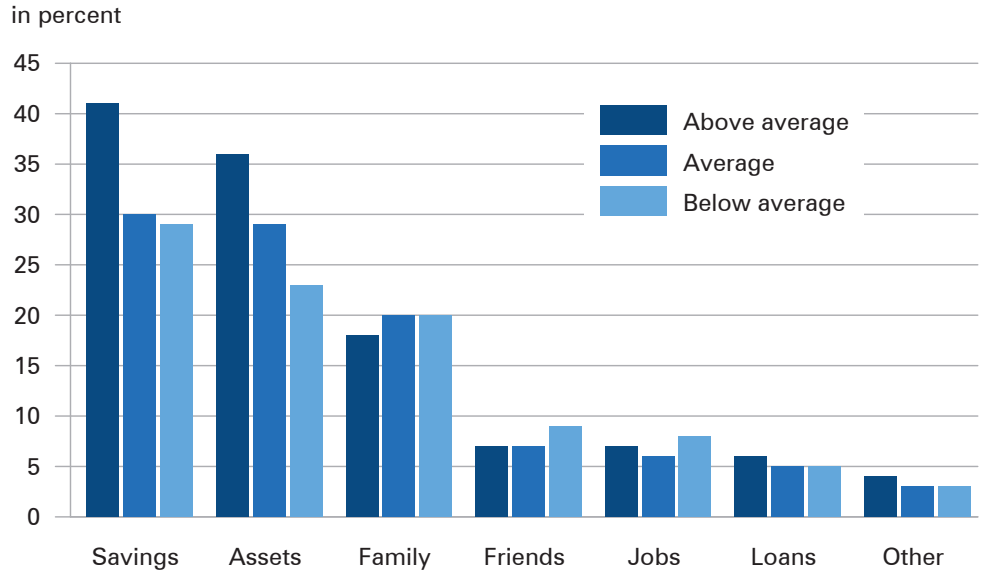
7 We are grateful to our respondents for sharing their time and experiences with us. All names used in this article are pseudonyms. Other details that would allow for an identification of the respondents, such as place of origin or residence, age, refugee status, or family relations are not shared to protect the participants.

organise his family members' moves to Germany. In contrast to Kamal, they did not have the financial means to pay smugglers for their journey and a legal pathway was not available. "We don't have money. Until now (April 2019), there are ways. But it is expensive. If someone decides now and would be willing to spend 10,000€, then they would make it to Germany." In consequence, Khalid remained separated from his family, who now remain in northern Syria under difficult conditions.

These two anecdotes point to the different socio-economic positions of Kamal and Khalid, as well as their families, prior to initial displacement. Data from the SOEP survey clearly shows socio-economic differences among the displaced. The journeys of refugees with an above-average financial background were almost twice as expensive as of those with below-average funds. Those from a higher financial background primarily relied on their personal savings and other assets to finance the journey, while respondents with lower socioeconomic status reported comparatively higher rates of funding by family and friends (Fig. 1).

The different means of available funding point to stratified mobilities that depend on financial background and social networks. Ahmad, an Afghan man who arrived in Germany in 2015 after he travelled to Europe via Turkey, Greece, and the Balkan route, spent about 6,000€ for his journey. The actual costs of the journey are not fixed, but rather depend on where you go, who supports you, and "who you escape with". He could only afford his journey with the financial support of his relatives from both Germany and Afghanistan (see also *Christ et al.* 2021 on the role of refugees' networks for their journeys to Germany).

Fig. 1: Sources of funding by respondents' financial background



Source: SOEP panel data, n=4,527

Whoever does not possess the required resources runs the risk of getting stuck in situations of protracted displacement, i.e. in refugee camps and/or in "countries of transit". If support networks cease to exist, contacts are lost, or people travelling together are separated and financial resources are depleted, making a living and saving up to finance the next leg of the journey becomes difficult. Ironically, it is common that people are first forced into mobility and then get stuck and are forced to be immobile.

4.2 Fragmentation and Deceleration of Journeys

The EU border regime excludes forcibly displaced migrants from legal and safe networks of transportation and forces them onto much more dangerous routes to travel undetected and clandestinely (*Martin* 2011), often facilitated by the ever-growing migration industry (*Andersson* 2014). Routes are rarely straightforward or linear, and are instead made up of different stages, detours, rerouting, times of waiting, detention, deportations, and pushbacks, followed by renewed attempts to cross borders and complete one's journey (*Collyer* 2010; *Schapendonk et al.* 2020).

Indirect travel with longer stays in third countries is an indicator of fragmented journeys. According to the SOEP data, 39 percent of respondents stayed in one or several countries of transit for more than three months on their journeys to Germany. The main country of prolonged transit (more than three months) was Turkey with 15 percent of respondents who did not travel directly, followed by Lebanon, Libya, Greece, Iran, and Italy. For the majority of travellers, these stays were involuntary and not intended: 63 percent of the respondents wanted to move to another country as quickly as possible and 12 percent wanted to return to their country of origin as soon as possible. The remaining 25 percent had indeed planned on staying there for longer.

The differences in time spent *en route* once again point to different degrees of fragmentation. The SOEP data shows that durations of journeys varied greatly. Some respondents took one day, while others took more than eight years. Almost half of the respondents arrived within one month, among them substantially more women than men. The survey data does not contain information on ir/regular modes of the journey, but it can be assumed that amongst those who travelled faster, the share of people who arrived through legal channels, particularly family reunification, is also higher. This would also explain the gendered mobility pattern.[8]

We see clear differences in the duration of journeys according to countries of origin: comparing the major countries of origin in the sample, Iraqis travelled the fastest; 68 percent needed up to one month for their journey to Germany, while 5 percent took two years or more. Syrians were also comparatively quick, with

[8] This is in line with official data on granted visas for family reunification. According to Germany's Foreign Office, 38 percent and 31 percent of people who entered Germany through family visa in the year 2015 were women reuniting with their husbands and children reuniting with a parent, respectively (*BAMF/BMI* 2016: 109).

46 percent arriving in Germany within one month of their departure, but 16 percent spending more than two years on the move. 35 percent of Afghans could complete the journey within one month and 18 percent needed more than two years. Eritreans needed the longest amongst all groups; only 8 percent travelled to Germany within a month, while 24 percent needed two years or more. While we see a correlation between the duration of refugees' journeys with the covered geographical distance and number of borders crossed, there was no direct link with the respondents' self-reported financial background. To some extent, this stands in contrast to the conventional argument that socio-economic class-positions are the most central factor determining the distance a displaced person can travel, but also the duration of their journeys (*van Hear* 2004).

Refugees' own narratives point to an ambivalent relationship between the duration, the costs, and the risks of these journeys. On the one hand, several interviewees strategically chose longer and indirect routes – thus requiring much more time – to avoid being detected at the border or by the police in the countries of transit, and to mitigate other risks, such as life-threatening sea passages. On the other hand, most tried to avoid longer journeys, as they can become much more expensive. The longer a journey takes, the more money must be spent *en route* for accommodation, food, and transportation. If journeys are interrupted repeatedly, for instance due to detection, detention, or encampment, or because of dwindling financial resources, the more difficult it becomes to re-start and to continue the journey, especially if no additional funds can be mobilised through one's transnational social network to pay for smuggling services. Ultimately, the route chosen and the distance to be covered, the costs for border crossings and the available funds to finance the journey – sometimes irrespective of one's actual financial background – all influence the journey duration. The (im-)permeability of borders in a highly stratified global migration regime shapes the duration and degree of fragmentation of refugees' journeys most decisively. States, however, not only exert power over displaced persons and other migrants by preventing mobility through visa regimes and border controls, but also by strategically decelerating journeys through externalised controls, encampment, and delays in bureaucratic procedures such as the (non-)processing of applications for asylum or family reunification (*Tsianos/Karakayali* 2010; *Tazzioli/Garelli* 2020; *Vries/Guild* 2019).

4.3 Violent Journeys

Only few legal pathways to Europe – such as family reunification, resettlement, or humanitarian admission – are available for forcibly displaced migrants. Most refugees who nonetheless aim to reach a destination in Europe cross borders by irregular means and are thereby confronted with different forms of violence. Forced migration occurs out of the fear or experience of a violent act and in search for safety, but refugees are likely to experience violence *en route* as their journeys are continuously shaped by violent encounters (*Bank et al.* 2017). As spelt out above, the fragmentation of journeys, the irregular status during the journey, and the "politics of exhaustion" (*Vries/Guild* 2019: 1) in borderlands creates an increased

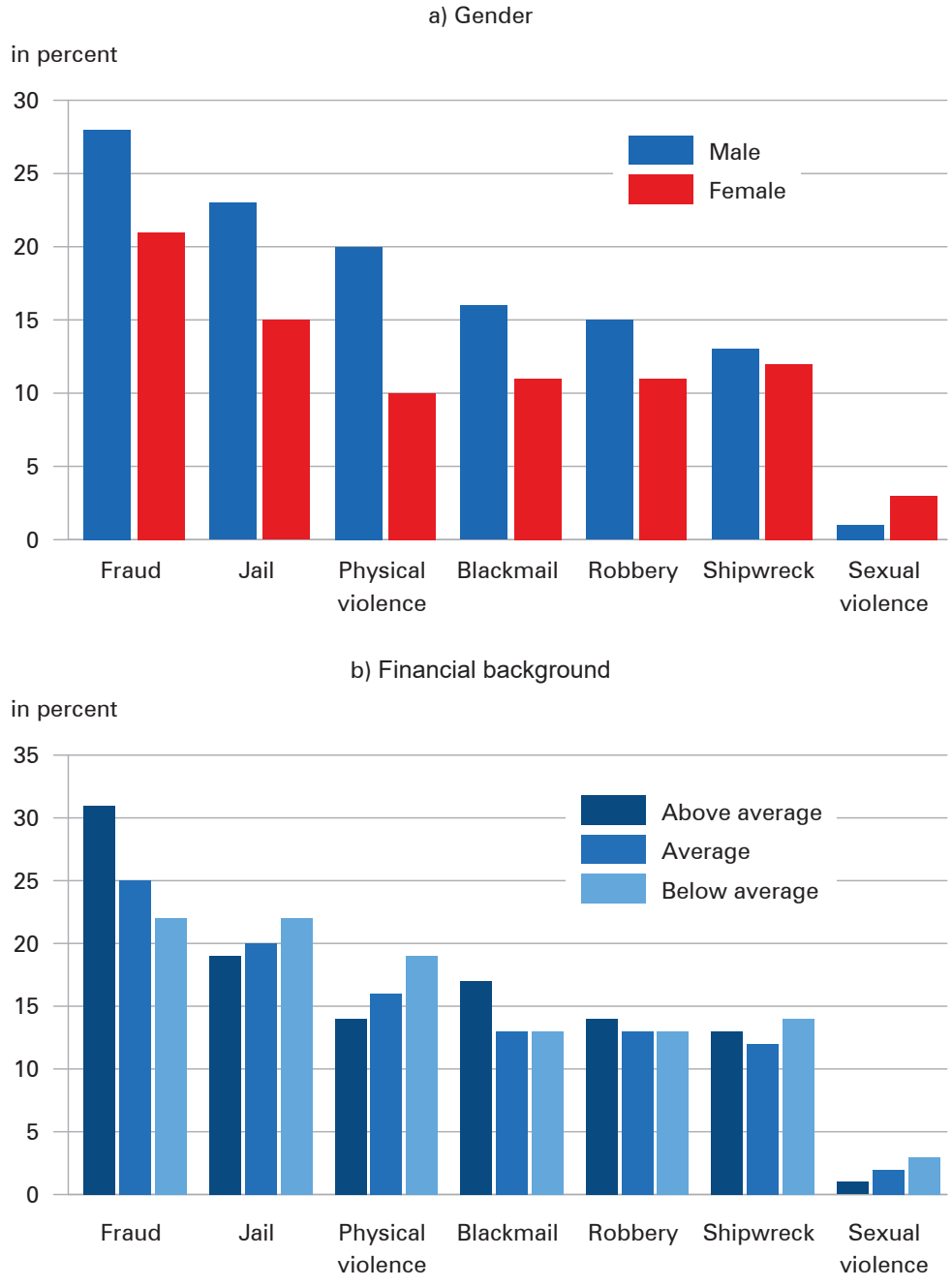
vulnerability and exposure to violence and violent actors, at the hands of fellow travellers, smugglers, or authorities such as border guards (*Baird* 2014).

The illicit nature of the journey and the clandestine routes expose refugees to unsafe means of transportation and routes (*Martin* 2011), e.g., across the Sahara or the Mediterranean. They then face elementary physical dangers such as dehydration as well as potential death in case of a breakdown of the vehicle in the desert or shipwrecks at high sea. Criminality, human rights abuses such as physical or sexual violence, robbery and blackmail, exploitation of labour or forced labour, and the death of other travellers are frequently recounted (*OHCHR* 2018, 2016). As refugees depend on the migration industry to reach their destination, illicit networks exploit these vulnerabilities as a business opportunity, at times kidnapping and detaining migrants until they receive ransom from relatives who are blackmailed (*RMMS East Africa And Yemen* 2017). Most cannot expect any support from the state – neither from the authorities of the country they are in nor by their country of origin – regarding access to basic human rights or the fulfilment of basic needs. Quite to the contrary, encounters with the state oftentimes are encounters with the border regime and its actors meting out further violent acts such as beatings, pushbacks, and detention (*OHCHR* 2016). Due to the lack of protection mechanisms and the implicit cooperation of some state actors in countries of transit with the migration industry, there are hardly any chances for migrants to pursue justice for such human rights abuses.

This exposure to violence is mirrored in the quantitative data. Half of the respondents who answered the respective questions in the SOEP survey reported to have had violent experiences *en route* to Germany. 43 percent of female and 55 percent of male respondents encountered violence on their journeys. However, a larger share of female respondents (40 percent vs. 31 percent of men) chose not to answer the questions regarding own experiences of violence. The survey measured several types of violence and multiple answers were possible. Figure 2a tabulates the frequency of seven types of violence experienced by migrants by gender. Fraud (25 percent) and imprisonment (19 percent) were the most frequently reported experiences of violence. Physical abuse, robbery, shipwrecks, and blackmail range between 12-15 percent, while 2 percent experienced sexual violence. As sexual violence carries a strong social stigma, the number of unreported cases is likely to be higher. While women experience sexual violence more frequently, men report higher shares of all other types of violence. Figure 2b breaks down the seven types of violence by migrants' financial resources. Refugees with higher financial status experienced physical and sexual abuse and imprisonment less frequently, while fraud and blackmail were more common than among those with lower financial status. Only the experience of shipwrecks during a boat crossing is not influenced by the respective socio-economic position.

Put simply, those who are better off are a more likely target for fraud, robbery, and blackmail, but they also seem to be able to afford ways to circumvent violent encounters. Those from a lower financial background are more often subject to imprisonment, physical violence, and sexual violence. This clearly indicates that

Fig. 2: Violence experienced by refugees on their journeys according to gender and financial background



Source: SOEP panel data, n=4,527

violence is experienced differently depending on one's socio-economic position or gender.

The directness of the route – whether one travelled directly to Germany (61 percent of respondents) or stayed in a country of transit for more than three months (39 percent) – correlates to violence experienced *en route*. 58 percent of those travelling indirectly report violence, while 46 percent of those travelling directly did. A fast journey also decreased reports of violence. 58 percent of those who reported no violence arrived in Germany within a month, while those who did experience violence took much longer on average.

4.4 Violence in Borderscapes

4.4.1 Violence along the Balkan Route

The qualitative material shows that avoiding danger, staying safe, and finding protection are central concerns for refugees, and that the journey is considered to be highly dangerous. The form of violence that was most reported in the qualitative interviews was direct violence by state agents, i.e. border guards, police officers, or soldiers who embody the border regime, and by smugglers. Encampment was also feared, often considered as a direct result of police encounters. Interviewees sought to avoid the prison-like conditions in some camps and the start of asylum procedures in certain countries, fearing that they would not receiving adequate treatment and severely limit their future opportunities.

Several refugees we interviewed did not want to stay in Greece in particular, even though the country is an EU member. In 2015, the Greek government provided hardly any humanitarian support and no incentives to stay, and indeed ushered refugees to move on. Hence, most refugees continued their journey north across the western Balkan to reach another EU member state. Different routes existed at the time. Arif, for instance, chose to leave Greece and crossed through Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, and Austria to arrive in Germany – a journey that took him around 17 days. He recounted that after they had managed to cross the Greek-Macedonian border, his group did not dare to stop walking: "We walked all night. Maybe ten hours. It never stopped raining. It was very cold. And now we (were) maybe 20 km away from the border." In Macedonia, they rested in an abandoned house, but while they were asleep "the police came. They shouted at us. The other two were like dead (tired) and didn't hear them. The police beat them, so they would go up. I was only beaten once, but the others were beaten several times until they got up. (...) We were taken by car back to Greece." After this incident, Arif and a travel companion again crossed the Greek-Macedonian border, passed through the country and reached Serbia, where they feared being detected and deported all the way back to Greece by the Serbian police. However, they managed to take a bus to Belgrade, where they felt safer and from where they could eventually move on.

Khalid travelled the Greek-Macedonian-Serbian route in August and September 2015. He recounted that after arriving in Hungary, "we were scared that the police would wait for us there. You cannot know where they will wait for you. You definitely

cannot make any sounds, otherwise the dogs come. When the dogs come, it is over." Khalid had feared Hungary because of possible encampment and imprisonment. "Hungary, it is really different. The prisons there are really like in Syria. You have to stay in prison for a month, you get beaten, you don't get a lot of food. That's why people are scared. They let the dogs loose on people. It's horrible there."

An alternative route to cross into EU territory emerged around 2017 after both the Serbian-Hungarian and the Serbian-Croatian borders became almost impenetrable. Migrants then tried to enter Croatia via Bosnia-Herzegovina, but often faced difficulties in the latter. In the European borderscape stretching from Bosnia–Herzegovina to Croatia, Slovenia, and Italy, refugees are frequently apprehended after having clandestinely crossed one or several borders and are then forcibly removed from the Schengen area (*Minca/Collins* 2021). Police and border guards use excessive force against migrants in these pushbacks, such as beatings, dog attacks, torture, sexual assault, theft, and the destruction of personal belongings (*BVMN* 2020). Boxer, a 19-year-old Pakistani who was interviewed in the Bosnian-Croatian border region reported:

> "I tried ten times (to cross the border from Bosnia into the EU). Two times I was deported from Trieste (an Italian town close to Slovenian border) (…) The border guards caught us in the night, the people were sleeping and didn't recognize that the police came. The Croatian police beat us everywhere, with sticks, kicks, tear gas, and pushed us back to the Bosnian border. One of them hit me in the face with his bare hand. My friend had his arm broken. Another broke his nose. When I saw that the border guards were going to beat me, I tried to protect my face and body. We didn't fight back, because they might have gotten angrier. (…) Croatian police took our sleeping bags, money, mobiles, shoes, jackets, everything. I don't know what they do with the mobiles and money, but they burned the jackets, bags, and shoes in a fire near the border" (*Themann* 2021; the quote has been lightly copyedited for clarity).

Violent pushbacks by Croatian border officials and the confiscation of personal items contribute greatly to the protracted immobilisation of forced migrants in Bosnia. Under these precarious conditions, it usually takes migrants weeks or months to equip themselves for another attempt at crossing the border. Many reported that they were stuck in the border region of Una-Sana for one to two years, and frequently subjected to state violence.

4.4.2 Violence along the Central Mediterranean Route

Stays in Libya were described by Eritrean respondents who came through the Central Mediterranean route as particularly difficult and "very, very dangerous" – if they wanted to talk about this phase of their journey at all. Many experienced violence, labour exploitation, and imprisonment, or witnessed sexual violence and the disappearance or death of friends. Most seemed to know about the horrendous

conditions for migrants and human rights violations in Libya (*OHCHR* 2018) and thus did not initially plan to go there, but later came to see it as the only path to Europe. However, not all migrants necessarily remained in Libya for longer periods of time. One reason for protracted immobility is the practice of imprisoning migrants in Libya and demanding ransom from their relatives in other countries – a violent form of how criminals aim to exploit the transnational social networks in which migrants are embedded (*RMMS East Africa And Yemen* 2017). Dawit and his partner were detained in an apartment with 30 people, where nobody was allowed to leave, only minimal food rations were provided, and the sanitary conditions were dismal. Unprotected and unaccompanied women were sexually abused. The smugglers tried to extract as much money from each migrant under their control as possible. It took Dawit one and half months until he was able to collect enough money from of his parents in Eritrea and a cousin in the United States. Only after 6,000€ were transferred, they were freed and "passed on" to other smugglers for the boat journey to Europe. Despite the traumatic memory, Dawit still considers himself lucky because he had relatives in other countries who could support them financially by paying the ransom in a comparatively short time. Others remained in Libya for much longer. "Three months, six months, some even a year and more, they stay there and cannot leave until they have money and find others to leave with", Dawit explained (see also *Christ et al.* 2021). Indeed, others waited much longer: Dan, a young Eritrean migrant who arrived in Germany in 2018 as an unaccompanied minor, also experienced such a dramatic phase of forced detainment locked in with other migrants in Libya. While he was on the move to his aunt in the UK, it was his uncle in Israel who bailed him out with $4,000. After an unbearable ten months of waiting, the smugglers received the money, and he was able to leave Libya in an overcrowded ship to Italy.

4.4.3 Dangers En Route

Irrespective of the route taken and the experiences made, many interviewees feared robberies, theft, betrayal, and exploitation. Kamal described the situation as follows: "Things like that happen, (people steal) organs or something and sell (them), (we heard) way too much." According to Kamal, money was the most important factor during the journey, which is why people often committed thefts: "Many people took advantage of us. It was too much. Some people, on the way, had no more money left, so they stole. (...) It was bad. Really." Khalid also explained that "there are many thieves *en route*. (...) We were all scared that we would be robbed. That they would steal our money. (...) You can't do anything about that." And Arif told a similar story: "They take your money. They won't kill you, but they take everything you have and leave you behind".

Such experiences and fears of violence *en route* – direct violence, pushbacks, encampment, robbery and fraud, shipwrecks – led Malek, a young man in his twenties from Afghanistan to conclude that he did not want his family members to travel irregularly as well. While he wanted them to come and reunite with him in Germany, he says: "I don't want (...) my family to come here now illegally. I wouldn't

do that. (…) Look, I have experience coming from Afghanistan to Germany (...) I told them no matter how much money you must spend; it is best to not come illegally (...) but to come normally."

The presented narratives of individuals are largely in line with findings by other scholars (*Martin* 2011; *Baird* 2014; *Shields* 2015; *Vries/Guild* 2019), human rights organisations (*OHCHR* 2016, 2018) and witness accounts (*BVMN* 2020). Both the quantitative and the qualitative data clearly show that violent experiences *en route* to Europe are the rule rather than the exception. Direct violence is pervasive, with state actors and smugglers being the main perpetrators. But structural forms of violence also shape these journeys, as only certain clandestine and dangerous modes of mobility are available to refugees.

5 Discussion of Central Findings

This paper has aimed to trace the impacts of the EU border regime on refugees' lives and their journeys. We took individual refugees' journeys as the focus of analysis, rather than abstract flows along routes or the potential impacts that displaced people's presence has at certain places. This change of perspective allows for deeper insights into refugees' own experiences of mobility, of the places through which they pass, of the local interactions and transnational networks that shape their trajectory, and of the violent encounters that have – often literally – left a mark in their lives. From this angle, the lived experience of "being on the move" and of "becoming a refugee" can be dissected as well as the dialectic relationship of (im-)mobility and fragmentation and the extent to which refugees' journey can be considered as violent processes in themselves (*BenEzer/Zetter* 2015; *Bank et al.* 2017). Based on the presented empirical findings, we argue that refugees' journeys to and through Europe must be understood as journeys of violence. A fundamentally uneven and asymmetric global mobility regime has created frictions and fragmentations in the European border space and beyond. We interpret this as a manifestation of structural violence. In this context, people who are on the move to and within Europe are frequently and systematically exposed to direct violence and must cope with its devastating consequences. The wider European border space is thereby not only a site of human rights violations and encounters with direct violence, but also a particularly contested space that systemically reproduces structural violence (*Tsianos/Karakayali* 2010; *Shields* 2015). Four central features of violent journeys emerge from our analysis.

First, we found that access to mobility is unevenly distributed and inherently stratified according to socio-economic positions (see *van Hear* 2004; *Weiss* 2005; *Urry* 2012). Access to mobility is strongly influenced by political discourses of who can travel smoothly and whose movements are and should be restricted, which reflects the "cultural violence" inherent to global mobility regimes. Accessing mobility requires resources such as travel documents and financial means, whoever does not possess these is unlikely to be able to leave in the first place or can only cross the border to a neighbouring state and cannot embark on a long-distance

journey. The SOEP data that we analysed showed that "class positions" shape trajectories and thereby reflect the stratifying effects of one's financial background. Our qualitative interviews also point to the fact that available capital is decisive for family members' capacity to follow others, which relates to the risk of displacement situations becoming protracted for those who cannot afford to move on. The experience of "involuntary stillness" (*Martin* 2011) in the sense of becoming stuck *en route*, whether this is in a Turkish city, a Libyan detention centre, or at the Bosnian border to Croatia, is thus also largely an effect of the stratification of mobility, which is built into the structures of global migration systems (*Glick Schiller/Salazar* 2013).

Second, and closely related to the sketched economic dimensions, refugees' journeys to Europe – be they irregular or regular – are increasingly fragmented. Migration trajectories evolve gradually, they are dynamic and non-linear processes. Forced migrants must constantly adapt to the circumstances into which they are thrown. Their multi-directional step-by-step-movements are frequently – sometimes violently – halted and re-routed. And oftentimes, people end up in a very different place than originally planned (*Collyer* 2010; *Schapendonk et al.* 2020). In the SOEP database, Germany is framed as the final place of arrival. However, many interviewees were in a weak legal position where arrival and longer-term settlement are legally obstructed and "voluntary return", forced deportation, and onward movements are quite likely. Others such as Kamal ended up in Germany by chance, while their desired destination was somewhere else. Hence, even when a journey seemingly comes to an end, this may well be continuously influenced by the border regime and its structural violence. Border regimes do not only operate at the physical border itself. They also affect life in the destination country and people's living conditions even after they have decided to stay in one place.

Third, 2015 was exceptional in the sense that not only a record number of people on the move reached European territory via irregular pathways, but also that the journeys were comparatively fast – half of the respondents in the SOEP study arrived within one month. This reflects the unique conditions of organised journeys across the Eastern Mediterranean and the Western Balkan route in that year. With the EU-Turkey deal and the subsequent (publicly declared) closure of the Balkan route in March 2016, refugees' mobilities to Europe were again decisively decelerated. Since then, long-term encampment in the EU borderscape has become the norm, leading to refugees' enhanced precarity and protracted situations in which the entrapped people can neither move back nor forth. The infamous camp Moria on the Greek island of Lesvos stands as a prime example of this disturbing trend of immobilising refugees in border spaces with the aim of discouraging further mobilities (*Tazzioli/Garelli* 2020; *Vries/Guild* 2019). The increased risks of immobilisation and fragmentation of journeys with longer and more dangerous routes is a clear consequence of structural violence against refugees and, in turn, immediately linked to frequent encounters with direct violence.

Fourth, in the wake of increasingly controlled, partially externalised and militarised border regimes, the access to safe pathways to asylum in Europe has not only become more restricted, but direct violence against people on the move is increasing and normalised. Refugees need to travel clandestinely, they rely on

others' knowledge about illicit border crossings, and they are forced to draw on and pay for the support of the migration industry. This "illegalisation" of migration leads to unsafe routes and is the prime reason why more than 50,000 individuals have lost their lives or gone missing *en route* to Europe in the past 30 years. It has also contributed to increasing the costs of journeys, which enhances the prevalence of fraud and stealing *en route* and indirectly leads to stranded migrants' greater exposure to labour exploitation. Moreover, social, political, and legal marginalisation make refugees more vulnerable to exploitation and mistreatment at the hands of official as well as private actors who embody the border regime. Direct violence may be inflicted by border guards, the police, or detention officers in Europe, as well as in the context of illegal pushbacks from Croatia or arbitrary imprisonment in Hungary. Other perpetrators of violence are not part of European states' authorities, but are also connected to the EU border regime. The case of Libya shows the normalisation of violence against migrants quite drastically. The EU and Libyan warlords have co-created a regime of migration control, with cooperation between the Libyan coast guard and human traffickers. Practices of border control go hand in hand with violence and crimes against migrants such as forced return, arbitrary detention, slavery, and sexual violence.

Overall, refugees' journeys to Europe are fundamentally shaped by violent encounters. While we need to differentiate the types of violence that are inflicted, we also need to acknowledge that different individuals and groups are exposed to violence to different degrees and have developed diverse coping strategies to circumvent and deal with violent encounters. We see a clear trend emerging: the degree of fragmentation of refugees' journeys correlates with the degree of violence encountered. We argue that the experiences of fragmented journeys with non-linear back-and-forth movements, forced immobilisation, and experiences of direct violence along the journey are deeply rooted in the border regimes that European governments have made great efforts to establish and consolidate in- and outside of the EU's territory.

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