

4. Mapping border walls across the Western Balkans

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Physical barrier appears [sic] to be an effective border protection measure that serves the interest of whole EU, not just Member States of first arrival. This legitimate measure should be additionally and adequately funded from the EU budget as a matter of priority. (Nehammer et al., 2021)

The above statement is drawn from a letter sent to the European Commission on 7 October 2021 by the governments of twelve European Union (EU) member states, namely Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, and Slovakia. These countries were calling for the EU to adapt its existing legal framework in response to the attempted ‘instrumentalisation of illegal migration for political purposes and other hybrid threats’ (Nehammer et al., 2021). One of their proposals was to obtain EU funding for the erection and maintenance of physical border barriers. On 12 January 2022, the Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson offered the following reply on behalf of the European Commission:

The Commission President reiterated on 22 October 2021, during the European Council, the Commission’s long-standing position of no EU funding for barbed wire or walls. Instead of such deterrent infrastructure, the Commission rather actively supports long-term, sophisticated integrated border management and surveillance solutions for an effective and speedy migration management and asylum system, in line with EU values and law protecting fundamental rights. (European Parliament, 2022)

However, while the European Commission has consistently refused to fund border walls, wall-building nonetheless predates the European Union since it has been practiced in Europe and beyond for centuries – we need to look no further than Hadrian’s Wall, the famous border fortification built by the Roman Empire, or the Great Wall of China (Vallet, 2022). Between 1945 and 1991, nineteen border walls were built around the world, many of which were

Cold War infrastructures (such as the walls separating the two Koreas and East and West Berlin). While some of these infrastructures were dismantled after the end of the Cold War, a large proportion of them remain functional today. Between 1991 and 2001, seven more walls were added to those that survived the end of the Cold War. After 9/11, the number of border walls built in the world has also risen dramatically. In 2022, there were seventy-four border walls, and fifteen more were planned (Ibid.). At times, the terms ‘border wall’, ‘fence’, ‘fortification’, and ‘barrier’ are used interchangeably in the relevant literature. While the materialities they describe present varying degrees of overlap, I will consistently use ‘border walls’ here. As explained by political geographer Elisabeth Vallet (2022), the term ‘border wall’ encompasses three aspects: first, it refers to a structure with a fixed masonry foundation, which can consist of solid blocks, concrete, or barbed-wire fencing. Second, it describes a fortification that marks the border between points of entry. Third, it refers to a barrier that functions either to assert territorial claims or to prevent the crossing of certain people, such as unwanted migrants, or of certain products, such as drugs (Ibid.). Hence, fences, barriers, and fortifications are all types of structures that the term ‘border wall’ can cover. However, ‘border wall’ implies a more layered materiality, allowing for the analysis of not only a specific masonry structure but also the barrier’s political nature and social ramifications.

With specific reference to the EU and the Schengen area’s external and internal borders, the overall length of border walls increased from 315 kilometres in 2014 to 2048 kilometres in 2022 (Dumbrava, 2022). One of the migration corridors most heavily affected by this surge in wall building on the external borders of the EU is the Balkan Route. In 2012, Greece started constructing a wall on its border with Turkey; followed by Bulgaria in 2014; Hungary, Slovenia, and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYRoM) in 2015; and, more recently, Serbia in 2020. However, despite the presence of these six walls, the academic literature on these specific barriers has been relatively scant and unevenly distributed. Thus, the aim of this chapter is to critically explore what has been written about these border walls to date. In so doing, I will predominantly comment on the existing academic work but, where appropriate, I will also consider ‘grey’ literature such as reports produced by international bodies and governments. Additionally, I will take into consideration some fieldnotes from initial exploratory fieldwork I conducted in North Macedonia on this topic together with my colleague Viki Mladenova in June 2024. By analysing the existing literature on border walls in the Balkans, I will also reflect on the ways in which such walls have become a constitutive element in the ‘making of the Balkan Route’. The chapter concludes with a series of propositions concerning possible directions for future research on border walls along informal migration corridors in Europe and beyond.

BORDER WALLS

The abovementioned surge in wall building and wall announcing has led to a surge in academic research focused on how such walls are legitimized and what they actually do. There is broad consensus within the existing literature on border walls in the fields of political geography and political science that the vast majority of the border walls erected since 9/11, as well as those currently being planned, represent a response to the movement of ‘unwanted people’ (see, among others, Avdan et al., 2023; Jones, 2012; Jones & Johnson, 2014; Koca, 2019; Korte, 2021; Vallet, 2014). As explained by political geographer Reece Jones in *Border Walls: Security and the War on Terror in the United States, India, and Israel* (2012), these walls reflect fear of ‘the enemy-other’: ‘the enemy-other is represented as no longer constrained by geography – as previous nation-state enemies were – and instead can strike anyone, anywhere, at any time’ (Jones, 2012: 2). Or, as remarked by Elisabeth Vallet and Charles-Philippe David, border walls – most of which are built by democratic governments – are ostensibly there so that states can ‘regain control of their borders’ (Vallet & David, 2012: 114).

Political scientist Wendy Brown characterized these walls as a reaction to difficulties experienced by nation states in governing their sovereign territories. In *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (2010), she explains: ‘the new walls often function theatrically, projecting power and efficaciousness that they do not and cannot actually exercise and that they also performatively contradict’ (Brown, 2010: 25). As Brown put it, the very existence of these border walls already denotes a loss of sovereignty. Brown’s arguments have since been taken up by other scholars studying border walls/security (see, among others, Avdan et al., 2023; Korte, 2023; McGuire, 2013; Vaughan-Williams, 2021). For example, sociologists Fabian Gülzau, Steffen Mau, and Kristina Korte (2021) have argued that the border walls built by countries such as Greece and Hungary may be seen as symbols of eroding state power in the face of increasingly complex cross-border mobilities: ‘in response, states have continuously expanded their toolkit of border control measures. In this process, governments reconfigure borders by shifting, fixing, and reinventing border controls’ (Gülzau et al., 2021: 10). According to this view, border walls are part of a constantly evolving ‘toolkit of border control measures’.

However, the ‘waning sovereignty’ of states only partially explains why border walls are built on certain borders and not on others. Political geographers Stéphane Rosière and Reece Jones (2012) have emphasized the importance of analysing the specific context of border walls. These authors explain that a closer look at these walls suggests that they are often constructed on borders that mark major wealth discontinuities. In their words, ‘a crucial aspect

of why a particular country engages in teichopolitics [the politics of building barriers on borders for various security purposes] is the economic, political, or social discontinuity the border has come to represent' (2012: 230). Similarly, in a comprehensive quantitative study of worldwide border infrastructures, Ron Hassner and Jason Wittenberg (2015) have concluded that borders are being fortified at an accelerating rate for economic rather than security reasons, particularly by countries that are richer than their neighbours. In the same vein, Fabian Gülzau and Steffen Mau have suggested that 'states erect "hard borders" primarily to reaffirm "discontinuity lines" between affluent and poor societies' (2021: 43). Their analysis shows that 'fortified borders', which account for about 20% of the world's borders, are most often located along borders where there are significant wealth gaps and/or cross-border differences in political regimes (Gülzau & Mau, 2021).

Another important line of inquiry regarding border walls is focused on whether these walls actually stop the movement of 'unwanted people' (Carter-White & Minca, 2025). While these expensive fortifications¹ are normally rhetorically sold to the general public as necessary to stop irregular migration, what emerges from the existing literature on this topic is that border walls do not actually stop people from crossing borders. Although they are made up of elaborate combinations of materialities and technologies, border walls remain porous and largely unsuccessful in regulating the movement of the 'enemy-Other' (Avdan et al., 2023; Gülzau et al., 2021; Minca & Rijke, 2017; Vallet, 2022; Vallet & David, 2012). As observed by Elisabeth Vallet (2022), 'research from around the world indicates that both the direct and indirect costs of building border walls exceed the benefits. Tunnels, drones, ladders, ramps, document forgery, and corruption – the strategies for circumventing the walls end up multiplying'.

In the words of political scientists Nazli Avdan, Andrew Rosenberg, and Christopher Gelpi, 'where there is a will, there is a way' (2023: 2). As discussed by Anna Krasteva in her analysis of the Bulgarian border wall, there is a 'contradiction between the solid materiality and high technology of the fence, and its permeability' (2020: 695). Krasteva illustrated this contradiction via multiple examples, such as local vigilantes 'arresting' migrants who have already crossed the border wall, the theatrical apprehension of migrants by local authorities within the national territory, and the high numbers of migrants still crossing the (unwalled) Bulgarian–Serbian border – migrants

¹ Border walls are typically exorbitantly expensive. For the wall built by the US on its border with Mexico, the first Trump administration requested an allocation of \$18bn in 2018 (Avdan et al., 2023), while the cost of the recently announced extension to the Greek border wall with Turkey has been estimated at €99.2m (Dimitriadi, 2023).

who are travelling to Europe and who have previously crossed the walled border between Turkey and Bulgaria. This relative porosity is actually key to the functioning of border walls, as Claudio Minca and I have already argued elsewhere (Minca & Rijke, 2017, 2019). The threat of ‘real-and-imagined migrant bodies’ and their (potential) breaching of border walls is required to legitimize these walls.

Although border walls may not ensure hermetically sealed borders, this does not mean that they do not have an impact. Rather, they are an important political technology that further differentiates between who is allowed to move unhindered and who should be stopped, checked, and possibly turned away. For those who can travel unhindered, people with the ‘right’ passport and sufficient financial means, the notion of a borderless world can still feel like a reality (Van Houtum & Van Uden, 2021). As Kristina Korte (2022) has commented, we are witnessing a process of simultaneous de-bordering and re-bordering at the global level: ‘While the number of border fences and walls is increasing worldwide, some people are nevertheless experiencing borders as more and more permeable’ (2022: 455; see also: Mau et al., 2015; Van Houtum & Van Uden, 2021). In this process, border walls are a key technology that helps sort people-on-the-move into different categories. This has been illustrated by Korte (2021) in her detailed analysis of the Hungarian border wall, which she categorized as a ‘filter border’. In other words, according to Korte, this border wall was not built to completely stop all cross-border movement, but it has helped to filter migration flows. Importantly, in contrast with other border walls such as that on the US–Mexico border, the Hungarian wall was not put up to bar the citizens of the ‘walled out’ country itself from entering. On the contrary, Serbian citizens can easily cross the border; they are not even required to have a visa. Political scientist Burcu Toğral Koca (2019) further highlighted the selective nature of the Hungarian border wall, noting that while it may appear to take a strict stance against migrants, this mostly applies to specific groups of migrants and not to others. In addition to Serbian citizens, Hungary has also allowed Ukrainian refugees to enter the country² and has kept its doors open to migrants with enough money to enter via the Hungarian ‘residency bonds’ programme, whereby ‘resident permits and a path to citizenship are granted to foreigners who invest at least €300,000 in Hungarian government securities’ (Koca, 2019: 188).

While border walls may not stop movement, they do have very real consequences. Border walls need to be circumvented or crossed by the ‘unwanted Others’ they target. This makes migrants’ journeys more difficult and forces

² A similar position was adopted by Bulgaria (Ralchev, 2022).

them to re-route or incur long delays (Vallet, 2022). Speaking about the Hungarian border wall, Korte has explained that:

The fence and the tightened legislation that came along with it led to a sharp drop in transit migration through Hungary. Many of the migrants were initially stranded in Serbia and eventually tried to move to other countries, taking different routes – mostly to Bosnia-Herzegovina and from there on to Croatia. (2021: 60)

Border walls also increase migrants' dependence on smugglers. As political scientist Angeliki Dimitriadi (2023) has confirmed in her analysis of the effects of border walls on Europe's borders: 'Fences do not deter people from moving but they do make their journeys longer and more reliant on smugglers – the very industry the EU claims it wishes to combat' (see Section 4). Often, the Route also becomes more expensive, with additional costs to migrants including 'increased travel through difficult terrain to circumvent the wall, increased [...] bribes or payments to smugglers to help them across, or increased wait times associated with remapping and redrawing access routes' (Avdan et al., 2023: 5).

Furthermore, migrants may be diverted to more dangerous routes. The walled border between Greece and Turkey, for instance, pushes migrants to choose much more perilous trajectories, such as across the Evros River or the Aegean Sea.³ In their analysis of the Greek border wall, political scientists Ioannis Grigoriadis and Esra Dilek reported that:

According to border guards, the construction of the fence led to a drop of 95 per cent in irregular migrant arrivals through the land border. However, this was accompanied by an increase of 231 per cent in arrests of irregular migrants at sea borders. (2019: 184)

These border walls do not only impact the people who are 'walled out', but also the society that is being 'walled in' (Korte, 2022). Border walls are visible proof that a government is 'doing something' in times of uncertainty (Vallet & David, 2012). Taking this one step further, Dimitriadi (2023) has argued that walls may be deemed successful in this regard at least:

³ Perhaps the most infamous example is the border wall on the US-Mexico border. In 2022, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) recorded 686 deaths and disappearances along the US-Mexico border. The vast majority of these deaths occurred in the desert areas, where there are no border walls (IOM, 2023). See also, among others, Jason De León's work on deadly migration routes across the US-Mexico desert (De León, 2015).

An important symbolic political gesture, the fence becomes the line on which the nation-state ‘defends’ itself against real and imagined threats. [Walls’] performative function is that they appear impenetrable, secure, and daunting. The image they conjure and the emotions they evoke, are often more important to policy makers than their actual effectiveness. (Section 4)

Similarly, Anna Krasteva (2020) pointed out that while the Bulgarian border wall does not stop people-on-the-move, it achieves three other outcomes. She described the effects of the Bulgarian border wall in terms of its ‘magic’ (2020: 696): more specifically, the border wall as a source of ‘political magic’, ‘economic magic’, and ‘symbolic magic’. According to Krasteva, the border wall’s political magic is given by its power to generate an unprecedented political consensus amongst political parties. Its economic magic consists of the additional financial investments that it attracts. Finally, the wall’s symbolic magic is manifested through its theatrical effects (Krasteva, 2020). This symbolic function of border walls has also been foregrounded by Kristina Korte. In her analysis of the workings of the Hungarian–Serbian border wall, she differentiated between three possible roles of border fortifications: material, filtering, and symbolic (Korte, 2023). The material function, in terms of physically blocking people at the border, and the filtering function, in terms of letting some people pass and stopping others, are only part of how border walls work. As observed by Korte (2023: 11):

When asked about the effectiveness of the material function, some experts considered the Hungarian fence to be somewhat effective (in combination with other measures), but at the same time they considered the symbolic function as much more important, since Hungary is not actually an immigration country.

As described by Grigoriadis and Dilek (2019), the symbolic function of the Greek border wall is aimed at both a domestic and an international audience. It is meant to portray a message at both the national level, ‘Greece is not an open gate to Europe and the border wall is there to protect its citizens’, and the EU level, ‘Greece is fulfilling its duty to the EU as a gatekeeper’ (Grigoriadis & Dilek, 2019: 176). Furthermore, the border wall was built during a time of great economic depression. This made its construction even more controversial, especially given that the EU refused to fund it.

Grigoriadis and Dilek argued that the border wall also diverted the attention of the Greek general public from the economic situation to a security issue – a security issue that the Greek government was positioning itself as adequately ‘handling’ (2019). The importance of taking into account the role played by border walls within domestic and regional politics has also been pointed out by border studies scholar James W. Scott in his analysis of the Hungarian border wall: ‘Hungary’s politics of borders are linked to an emphatic re-assertion of

national identity and sovereignty as well as the imposition of a new political reality in which liberalism and its advocates are marginalized' (2021: 1). According to Scott, Hungary's government has exploited the 'refugee crisis' to retain domestic power, while, at the same time, pushing for a more conservative turn in the EU (Ibid.). Kristina Korte has also argued that it is important to analyse the domestic impact of border walls, specifically homing in on both Hungary and Serbia in her own work (2021, 2022). In her view, the Hungarian border wall actually allowed Serbia to portray itself to the EU as 'the good guy'. In relation to Hungary's domestic politics, she has suggested that 'in order to analyze the purposes of the border fence, it is thus important to understand not only against whom (or what) the fence was built, but also for whom it was built – in this case, potential Hungarian voters' (Korte, 2022: 463). To do this, she has drawn on the concepts of 'fencing in' and 'fencing out', proposing that both the impact on and intentions towards the people being 'fenced in' and those being 'fenced out' need to be analysed as different facets of the same complex process of bordering (Ibid.).

Thus, to conclude this section, border walls are an expensive and increasingly popular border technology. While they clearly make informal migration routes more dangerous, difficult, and expensive, causing migrants to become more dependent upon smugglers, they lack the capacity to completely block people-on-the-move (Avdan et al., 2023; Vallet, 2022). Furthermore, their domestic and international symbolic power seems to be at least as important as, and perhaps even more important than, their effectiveness in reducing or 'filtering' migrant mobility. In light of this set of considerations, the next section will explore the presence and impact of border walls along the Balkan Route specifically.

BORDER WALLS IN THE BALKANS

In 2015, the number of migrants moving through the Balkans on their way to the EU increased significantly. While the region had previously served as a transit area for migrants over many decades, as reflected in Greece's and Bulgaria's moves to construct their border walls in 2012 and 2014, respectively, the number of people from outside of Europe moving through the area in 2015 was unprecedented in recent decades (Beznec et al., 2016). At first, most of the countries along the Balkan Route allowed migrants to cross their borders, perhaps not knowing what else to do, but also aware that these people would keep moving north. Some countries, such as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia, also facilitated the migrants' transit by laying on trains and buses (Hameršak et al., 2020). However, this only lasted a few months. In response to Austria tightening its border controls already in the summer of 2015, Hungary began building a wall on its border with Serbia in

July 2015 (completed in October 2015) and quickly followed up with another wall on its border with Croatia in September 2015. Slovenia followed suit and started constructing a wall on its border with Croatia in November 2015, at about the same time as North Macedonia completed a wall on its border with Greece (Dumbrava, 2022). With Croatia's entry into the Schengen area, these two walls on its borders have become somewhat obsolete and are planned to be/have partially been removed (Bandic, 2022; Desku, 2023; Euronews, 2022).⁴ In 2020, Serbia initiated the construction of the latest addition to the walled borders in the Balkans along its border with North Macedonia.

While analysing the national specificities of border walls is important, the interconnectedness of the border walls in the Balkans should not be overlooked. However, this aspect has received limited attention in the academic literature to date. Yet, events along one segment of the Balkan Route often affect the corridor as a whole (see Chapter 1, this volume). For example, the border walls built in 2015 and 2016 in this region should be viewed as part of the same overarching process – the closure of the informal humanitarian corridor that operated across the region for a few months during the so-called 'long summer of migration'. Accordingly, in the following subsections, I discuss each of the five border walls currently present in the Balkans, delving into some of their specificities, while also addressing their interrelatedness. In so doing, I predominantly draw on the academic literature but, where appropriate, I also engage with salient grey literature. Furthermore, in the sections that examine the walls on the borders of North Macedonia, I have included some preliminary notes from the fieldwork that I conducted in the area in June 2024.

On the Greek–Turkish Border

In 2012, Greece constructed a 4-metre-high fence on its border with Turkey. This border wall, which initially was only 10.3 kilometres long, consisted of 'six serial barbed wire lines with thermal sensor cameras and continuous patrol service' (Besenyó, 2017: 80). It was built between the villages of Kastanies and Nea Vyssa on the Greek side of the land border (Grigoriadis & Dilek, 2019).⁵ The border wall has since been extended and is currently a 37.5-kilometre-long, 5-metre-high steel fence. In April 2023, the Ministers of Migration and Asylum and Citizen Protection and Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis signed a contract for the wall along the Greek-Turkish border to be

⁴ Given that these walls are planned to be taken down, they are not discussed here.

⁵ Much of the land border between Greece and Turkey follows the course of the Evros river. The first part of the border wall has been built on the sections of the land where the border deviates from the river.

extended, a project that will double the current border wall and is estimated to cost €99.2 million (Dimitriadi, 2023).

The land border between Greece and Turkey has seen hundreds of thousands of migrants seeking to enter the EU over the last two decades and has been characterized as one of the most heavily militarized borders in Europe (Ibid.). While 14,461 people were estimated to have crossed the land border between Greece and Turkey in 2008, this number went up to 54,974 in 2011 (Ibid.). In 2014, less than 2,000 people were estimated to have crossed the land border between Greece and Turkey. This figure has remained relatively low, with 6,162 people putatively having used the land border in 2023 (IOM, n.d.). The border wall has accordingly been celebrated as a 'success' by the Greek state – in January 2023, the Minister of Citizen Protection, Takis Theodorikakos stated that the border wall had stopped 260,000 migrants from entering the country in 2022 and helped to arrest 1,500 traffickers (Kantouris, 2023). The drop in the number of people entering Greece via the land border has been accompanied by an increase in the number of people entering via the sea border. In 2011, 1,114 entered Greece via this border, while in 2014 this went up to 43,618 (Dimitriadi, 2023). This number has remained high, with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) registering 41,768 people crossing the sea border in 2023 (IOM, 2024). Although the reasons for this rerouting are unclear, and it is impossible to determine the precise impact of the border wall, there is firm evidence that people-on-the-move are still entering Greece.

Greece requested EU funding for the border wall in 2010, but this application was rejected. As stated by the European Commissioner for Home Affairs, Cecilia Malmström, in February 2012: 'The Commission considers that the construction of a technical barrier in Evros at the Greek/Turkish border is not an effective measure to counter irregular migration [...]', adding that the Commission was ready to '[...] co-finance other more effective measures within the comprehensive strategy that Greek authorities have planned to establish to ensure an integrated border management system for the whole length of the land border between Greece and Turkey' (European Parliament, 2012). While constructing the border wall amidst economic depression and without EU funding was controversial, it was nevertheless completed. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Grigoriadis and Dilek (2019) suggested that the border wall has also served to deflect public attention away from the dire economic conditions afflicting the country and towards the issue of securitizing its borders; something the Greek government could tangibly show it was addressing. Greece has once again requested EU funding for the latest planned extension of its border wall, but this request too has been denied. However, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis has insisted that the extension will go ahead, even without EU funding (AFP, 2023).

On the Bulgarian–Turkish Border

Bulgaria began constructing a wall along its border with Turkey in 2014. Initially a 33-kilometre-long razor-wire fence, it was extended to 235 kilometres in 2017 (Dumbrava, 2022). The wall is 3 metres high and reinforced with razor-wire coils (Mortimer, 2015). It was built in response to the high number of migrants entering the country in the preceding years. According to the Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees, the number of migrants increased sixfold from 1,387 people in 2012 to 7,144 in 2013 and continued to increase, reaching 20,391 in 2015 (Krasteva, 2020). While in other countries in the region the movement of migrants dropped after the ‘closure’ of the Balkan Route, it has remained high in Bulgaria (Ibid.). IOM recorded the arrival of 18,554 migrants in Bulgaria in 2023 (IOM, n.d.). As explained by Plamen Ralchev, a professor of international relations at the University of National and World Economy in Sofia, most migrants see Bulgaria as a transit country. It was thus anticipated that the vast majority of these migrants would move on to other countries. This is because Bulgaria is one of the poorest countries in the EU, and so most migrants prefer to move on from there to Western Europe (Ralchev, 2022).

As suggested by the statistics cited above, the border wall did not stop people from entering the country. According to Ralchev (2022), many sections of the border wall have sustained damage, and both migrants and government officials admit it can be crossed without great difficulty. This does not mean that the route through Bulgaria as a whole is an easy one for the migrants. As explained by Krasteva (2020), there has been an increase in paramilitary groups operating along the border who (at times violently) ‘arrest’ migrants. Furthermore, Bulgarian border guards have been reported to have violently attacked migrants – beating, robbing and stripping them, and using police dogs – and to have (illegally) pushed migrants back into Turkey (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Bulgaria, which has been a member of the EU since 2007, has recently become a member of the Schengen area. Air and sea border controls were lifted in March 2024, and in January 2025 Bulgaria has fully become part of the Schengen space of free circulation. During its journey towards Schengen membership, Bulgaria’s border wall was a key focus. The so-called ‘Air Schengen’ formula was proposed by Austria, whose position was that full Schengen membership will only be possible when Bulgaria’s land borders are fully secured. Austria’s proposal was paired with a list of demands, including an increase in the number of Frontex officers⁶ deployed at the border and

⁶ Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, is the border enforcement agency responsible for managing and coordinating the external

EU funding for the further development of Bulgaria's border infrastructure (Liboreiro, 2023). The number of Frontex officers has indeed been increased: in early 2024, 500 extra Frontex officers were sent to support the implementation of border controls (Reuters, 2024). However, discussions regarding the further development of Bulgaria's border infrastructure were ongoing at the time of writing this chapter (European Union, n.d.).

On the Hungarian–Serbian Border

As noted at the outset of this chapter, after Austria tightened its borders in the summer of 2015, Hungary began to build a wall on the border with Serbia in July 2015, quickly followed by a wall on the border with Croatia in September 2015. It has been estimated that over 400,000 people crossed Hungary's borders in 2015, and as a Hungarian government spokesman, Zoltán Kovács, put it in June 2015: 'we need to stop the flood' (Kingsley, 2015). Protection against immigration and terrorism was cited by the Hungarian government as justification for these border walls but, as Kristina Korte has pointed out, 'although Hungary was affected by the so-called refugee crisis in the sense that hundreds of thousands of people entered the country, the effect was limited, since the majority of them only transited through' (2021: 56).

The border wall between Hungary and Serbia, which was reinforced in 2017 (Sandford, 2017), consists of a 4-metre-high double fence, topped with barbed wire. The fence is partly electrified and reinforced with wire mesh and a concrete foundation, and it features heat sensors and cameras. It covers the entire border with Serbia and is 155 kilometres long (Korte, 2022). In addition to the border walls, Hungary created two 'transit zones' along the border with Serbia in 2015: in practice, two containers where migrants travelling from Serbia to Hungary can request asylum. These were set up with a view to expediting this process and overseeing it to completion. Given that Hungary had declared Serbia a 'safe third country', almost all claims are deemed 'inadmissible'. This allowed Hungary to immediately send people back to the Serbian side of the border wall. Given that the border wall has been constructed on Hungarian soil, this simply means sending migrants to the other side of the wall. As such, they are not technically being 'pushed back' to Serbia, a practice that is illegal under EU law and violates the Geneva Conventions, but rather remain inside Hungary (Beznec et al., 2016; Minca & Collins, 2021; Šantić et al., 2017).⁷

borders of the EU member states (Frontex, n.d.).

⁷ Hungary has been reported for enforcing pushbacks to deport migrants to Serbia, a practice sanctioned nevertheless by the European Court of Justice in 2020 as being in violation of EU law (DW News, 2020).

The border wall and transit zones soon led to the formation of makeshift camps on the Serbian side of the border, where people waited to hear if they would be allowed to enter the transit zones (Cantat, 2017). So-called ‘waiting lists’ were drawn up with the names of those entitled to access the transit zone. While the Hungarian government decided on the number of people on the list, ‘a group of “community leaders” was apparently entitled to manage the list and cooperate with the Hungarian border authorities to select the [...] individuals admitted through special “migrant doors” at the two border points [...]’ (Minca et al., 2018: 54; see also Minca & Collins, 2021). In 2018, the waiting time to access the transit zones was estimated to be around 1.5–2 years and these irregularly and arbitrarily managed waiting lists, combined with the border walls, were ‘used to create an image of legality and order’ (Korte, 2023: 13), while keeping those waiting in a continuous state of limbo. After a European Court of Justice ruling in 2020 in which it was stated that people could not be detained for more than twenty-eight days in these transit zones, while some had been detained there for 400 days, the Hungarian government announced that it would close the zones (Balkan Insight, 2020).

The border wall has been described as a great success by Hungarian politicians (Jamieson, 2018; Visegrád Post, 2017), and initial data presented by the Hungarian police only a few months after the border wall had been erected in 2015 indicated a significant decrease in the number of migrants intercepted since the completion of the wall (Besenyo, 2017). Together with tighter legislation – which, for instance, criminalized irregular border crossings and ‘legalized’ pushbacks, whereby any migrant found within 8 kilometres of the border wall could be deported to Serbia – and heightened police violence, the wall made the border much more dangerous and expensive for people-on-the-move. However, while many migrants were initially stranded in Serbia and many of them diverted to Bosnia and Herzegovina and to Croatia, this did not mean that this branch of the Route closed altogether (Minca & Umek, 2020; Minca & Collins, 2021). Hungary’s border was indeed relatively porous until recently. In 2021, the number of migrants intercepted in Austria nearly doubled, rising from 21,641 in 2020 to around 40,000 in 2022 (Than, 2022). According to the Austrian Interior Ministry, the vast majority of these had entered the country via Hungary (Ibid.). Unfortunately, at the time of writing, I was unable to access further data on how many people have crossed the border between Hungary and Serbia in recent years.

While the border wall’s effectiveness in halting irregular border crossings remains open to debate, Hungary has, however, successfully used it as a political tool. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz Party has used the border wall and its putative effectiveness in reducing irregular border crossings for political gain, especially during election campaigns. For example, the topic of the border wall was leveraged in the run-up to the parliamentary election

of 2018, which was won by Fidesz (Korte, 2022). Furthermore, as previously mentioned, the Hungarian government has also linked its border policy to the reaffirmation of Hungarian identity and sovereignty, the oppression of liberalism, and the push for a more conservative turn within the EU (Scott, 2021).

On the Macedonian–Greek Border

In November 2015, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia built several stretches of wall along its border with Greece. This border wall, which covered 37 kilometres of the 172-km-long border, was made of 3-metre-high double razor-wire fences (Hall, 2016). While its construction was announced in response to an increase in migrants crossing the border, the emergence of this border wall should not be seen as independent of Hungary and Slovenia closing their own borders in the same period (Williams, n.d.).

Macedonia⁸ has long been viewed as a transit country. However, prior to 2015, the people moving through Macedonia were relatively invisible. As commented by a local activist interviewed by Beznec, Speer, and Stojic Mitrović: ‘It’s just we couldn’t really see them, because they were going through the forests. And the numbers of people crossing were significantly smaller’ (2016: 15). This changed in 2015, when the scale of transit increased significantly and people-on-the-move became visible as they walked along the train tracks towards Serbia. In the beginning, the Macedonian authorities allowed the migrants to cross the country – at times aiding them by putting on extra trains – based on the awareness that Macedonia was not their final destination (Beznec et al., 2016).

However, in August 2015, the border was closed for three days. It remains unclear exactly why the Macedonian authorities decided to close its southern border with Greece at that time. A report published by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Foundation (Beznec et al., 2016) speculated this may have been a strategy to put pressure on the EU to provide North Macedonia with more financial support, as well as a response to domestic pressures. As argued by Agata Domachowska, the closure of August 2015 was necessarily brief because it was not deemed feasible to keep the thousands of people – including families with young children – on the other side of the border wall away with tear gas and violence (2019). The border was opened, but closed again in November, except for people travelling from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. This policy, which echoed similar policies in Croatia and Slovenia, was accompanied by

⁸ For the purposes of brevity and continuity, at times this chapter uses the term ‘Macedonia’ to refer to ‘the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia’ (FYRoM) – as it was called prior to 2018 – as well as ‘North Macedonia’ (as it has been called since 2018).

the construction of a border wall (Domachowska, 2019). As stated by Nikola Poposki, Macedonia's Foreign Minister, 'we too will need some kind of physical defense to reduce illegal border crossing [...] Either soldiers or a fence or a combination of the two' (TIME, 2015).

The border wall was said not to be aimed at closing the border – which may also be deduced from the fact that it only blocked off a small part of the 172-km border (Milenkoski & Talevski, 2001) – but rather at 'funnelling' migrants to border crossings where they could be checked. However, the location of the border wall also seems to have been partly determined by the terrain. As explained by a humanitarian worker working with migrants in North Macedonia:

The rest of the terrain here is mountainous. It's very hard, very difficult to cross and there's no need for [...] according to what the authorities might envisage, for the protection of its border, there is no need for [a] border fence.⁹ (Interviewed in June 2024)

As declared by the Macedonian government at the time of the wall's construction, 'the border will remain open and all migrants from the war-affected zones will be allowed to enter' (Kantouris & Testorides, 2015). The new travel restrictions and erection of the border wall in November 2015 were met with protests by migrants suddenly finding themselves stuck at the border. This led to violent clashes between them and the Macedonian border police during the initial stages of construction (Eleftheriou-Smith, 2016). The Gevgelija (Macedonia)–Idomeni (Greece) crossing played a key part in these events, while a second section of the border wall was constructed at the Medžitlija–Niki crossing (Domachowska, 2019). Gevgelija–Idomeni had been a key transit point along the Balkan Route, but after the border closed, a makeshift camp sprang up in early 2016 on the Greek side of the border wall. This camp was located at the train tracks near Idomeni and briefly housed thousands of people (Jordan & Minca, 2023; Katz et al., 2018). The camp, where conditions were described as disastrous due to the lack of facilities, was dismantled by the Greek authorities in May 2016 (Pelliccia, 2019).

While the border wall was reinforced in August 2016 (DW News, 2016), it is unclear what state it is in as I write. It is likewise difficult to establish what impact the border wall had after the Idomeni camp was dismantled and whether the border wall has been nationally or regionally framed as 'successful'. Little information is available on these matters. IOM has reported 22,379 people-on-the-move crossing North Macedonia in 2022 and only 11,795 in

⁹ During the interview, the interviewee often referred to the border wall as the (border) 'fence'.

2023 (IOM, n.d.). The border wall is, however, unlikely to have contributed much to this recent decline in arrivals, although this cannot be claimed with certainty either. Claudio Minca and Dragan Umek, for example, in research conducted in Italy with migrants who had completed the Route, found no evidence that this specific border wall had impacted their journey (see Chapter 7, this volume). Nevertheless, further research is required to better appreciate the role this wall has played historically and continues to play today. Overall, this border wall seems to have primarily been constructed as a response to other countries further north closing their borders and in keeping with their related claims to have ‘closed the Balkan Route’. Now that the situation has settled down following early responses to the humanitarian emergency that impacted the Balkans in 2015, and with thousands of migrants who keep moving north via this territory every year, this border wall may have lost (part of) its significance.

On the Serbian–North Macedonian Border

The most recent addition to the border walls present in the Balkans is the wall Serbia is currently building on its border with North Macedonia. In August 2020, Serbia began constructing a border wall to the east of the main highway from North Macedonia to Serbia. The border wall comprises two 5-metre-high fences, reinforced with razor-wire coils, and its appearance has been compared to the Hungarian border wall on the border with Serbia (KlikAktiv, 2021). An extension to the west of the main highway, near the village of Miratovac, as well as the addition of a third fence, made up entirely of barbed wire, was announced in August 2020. This new segment of wall was meant to be constructed between the Serbian villages of Miratovac and Slavujevac (KlikAktiv, 2022). However, while visiting the area in June 2024, the wall appeared to be only a few kilometres long and confined to the east of the train tracks. At that time, there was no further construction taking place.

According to KlikAktiv (2021), a Serbian NGO that provides legal support to refugees, the Serbian government used the Covid-19 pandemic and a decree aimed at preventing the spread of this infectious disease to legally occupy the land alongside the border and to start constructing the border wall. As reported by the Serbian news channel N1, the mayor of the border municipality of Preševo stated that the construction of the border wall was part of a deal with the EU, adding: ‘We think that the fence is an additional protection of the boundaries with the non-EU countries from an influx of refugees who might again come en masse through the Balkan Route’ (N1 Belgrade, 2020a). Two days later, N1 reported that the European Commission had commented that while financial and technical support had been provided to Serbia to manage migration, ‘those funds, however, do not include building fences which, as it

has been wrongly published, is not a part of any agreement' (N1 Belgrade, 2020b).

Very little information can be found on this border wall. KlikAktiv has published two short reports (2021, 2022) on the development of the wall, and only a few news stories have been devoted to it.¹⁰ Hence, at the time of writing, it remains unclear whether this wall will be further extended and what influence it might have on migrants, the local population, and national and international politics.

WHAT'S NEXT?

In conclusion, and in light of the literature just reviewed, three key questions seem to emerge that may inform future research on border walls along this informal migration corridor: first, how can border walls in the Balkans be analysed as part of 'a route'? Second, can we investigate the impact of these walls on both people-on-the-move and the residents of border regions? Third, what are the methodological implications of the fact that border walls are difficult, if not impossible, to study 'on the ground' due to restrictions imposed by the respective governments, while at the same time official data on these infrastructures remain relatively scarce and difficult to obtain?

Let us start by considering the importance of analysing the border walls as part of 'a migration route'. As discussed in this chapter, bordering practices in a given Balkan country are often influenced by the practices of neighbouring countries. For example, studying the border wall built by North Macedonia on its border with Greece requires taking into account the bordering practices of Serbia, Hungary, Slovenia, and Austria. While this cannot be stated conclusively, one could speculate that if these countries had kept their borders open in 2015 and beyond, North Macedonia might not have constructed a wall on its Greek border (see Minca & Collins, 2021). It could also be argued that without the Balkan Route, there would most likely be no border walls in this region and that, at the same time, without border walls the Route would function very differently. While it remains important to appreciate the national specificity of border walls, it is crucial to examine the walls' role along the Route as a whole, including their broader geopolitical implications. As I have stated elsewhere with Claudio Minca, a decline in crossings at one border typically implies a rise at another (Minca & Rijke, 2017). This was clearly observed when the Hungarian border wall was constructed, as many people-on-the-move modified their route, opting to cross through Croatia and later Bosnia and Herzegovina rather than attempting to cross from Serbia into Hungary

¹⁰ ANSA, 2020; Dawn, 2020; N1 Belgrade, 2020a, 2020b.

(Minca & Umek, 2020). Hence, to better understand why border walls are built in the first place and what effects they have once made operational, future research should adopt a 'regional' perspective, considering how each specific barrier impacts the dynamics of the entire migration corridor.

Secondly, and as already mentioned in this chapter, border walls 'wall out' but also 'wall in'. While the experiences of people being 'walled out' have been studied (see, for instance, Hess & Petrogiannis, 2020) as have the domestic politics of countries that have built them (see, for example, Scott's [2021] and Korte's [2022] analyses of the related situation in Hungary), the effects of these walls on the daily lives of those who are 'walled in' have rarely been analysed (but see Vaughan-Williams, 2021). These walls have been constructed along borders that were previously quite open for local populations. Crossing borders for work, school, visiting family, shopping, and even small-scale smuggling of goods like cigarettes, alcohol, or petrol, were common daily activities (see, for example, Archer & Rácz, 2012). Furthermore, farmers may own land right up to the border or even on both sides. Border walls impact all of these practices. Therefore, more empirical research is needed to jointly investigate the experiences of the two groups – those 'walled in' and those 'walled out' (see also Korte, 2021).

Thirdly, we come to the methodological question of how border walls may be studied. As explained at the beginning of this chapter, a border wall consists of both its material reality and the social and political effects it generates. In the existing work on border walls in political geography and political science, the materiality of these walls is often overlooked. While academic papers frequently provide brief descriptions of the walls' physical characteristics, such as their height and length – as I have also done in this chapter – other material aspects are rarely analysed in depth. The materiality of border walls – in terms of their un/wieldiness, sharp and pointy wiring, cameras, and heat sensors, as well as the possible presence of dogs and soldiers – is crucial not only to the walls' functioning but also to the daily practices of the people confronted by them. But how can one study such materialities and their impact in detail when the area around a border wall is often a militarized space, generally inaccessible to researchers? This is a key question I aim to address more fully in my forthcoming work and as part of my contribution to the ERC project TheGAME, which has prompted this initial exploration of the literature on border walls as a critical feature of the Balkan Route.

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