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Research article

Separated in death: Border deaths and agency of the dead on the Balkan migratory trail

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Abstract

Over the last decade, border deaths have become a very present part of the migration landscape along the so-called Balkan route. Focusing on these deaths, this article shows how they involve striking separation of identity (name, biography) and body. Moreover, we argue that this separation is both a product of the migration politics and border regime and a product of the agency of the dead. On one side, due to the physical distance, lack of information, and in some cases disappearances, relatives struggle to mourn the deceased without being in touch with the body. On the other side, due to the literal lack of name, when the deceased are unidentified, locals in places of death struggle with how to take care of and pay tribute to the deceased without knowing the name or the social being of the deceased. Based on our ethnographic research of border deaths along the so-called Balkan route from 2020 onwards, we analyze how the agency of the dead emerges from relatives, mourning while searching for the body, and locals paying tribute while searching for the name. This agency manifests through diverse acts—from identification and repatriation efforts or appeals to international bodies, to the development of burial protocols and commemorative practices. In this context, the border regime, through its racialised logic of division and hierarchization, produces and maintains this split, intensifying the social disappearance of migrants. Yet paradoxically, this enforced separation also generates forms of resistance and increasing political consciousness among both relatives of the deceased and local witnesses to border deaths.

KEYWORDS: border deaths, body, name, Balkan route, agency of dead, relatives, locals

Border deaths and agency

The agency of illegalized border crossers, refugees and other migrants is often questioned and overlooked. They are, at best, if not seen as criminals or villains, represented as victims of oppressors and oppressive situations in their home countries. Moreover, dead migrants seem to be twice as stripped of agency—first as migrants and then as the dead, since the dead are often described as deprived of agency. In contrast to these simplified, stereotypical representations that relentlessly assail us every day, ethnographically based research on the lives and deaths of migrants points to different forms of agency related to migrants and migration.

In today's widely embraced, as well as challenged, approach of autonomy of migration, migrants' agency is seen as crucial for migratory processes. As discussed in our previous work (Hameršak, Lipovec Čebron & Zorn, 2025), Yann Moulier-Boutang, who is considered to be the author of the concept of autonomy of migration, describes migration as "an autonomous fact. This means that there is autonomy of migration in relation to the policies of states, and this applies to both emigration and immigration" (Moulier-Boutang, as cited in Hameršak, Lipovec Čebron & Zorn, 2025, p. 8). Here, autonomy primarily refers to autonomy in relation to the circumstances of migration and flight, situation at the labor market or migration control. Migration, including the autonomy of migration, cannot be conceived or researched without examining the policies and practices of states or some external structures, but it also cannot be reduced to a reaction to them. Migration has its own logic, its own motivations and its own trajectories (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013, p. 184; Arkawi, 2024).

By investing significant financial resources, risking their lives and health, sharing knowledge of routes and crossing points among themselves, and continuously finding new ways to cross and overcome obstacles, people migrate despite state efforts to prevent them from doing so. As formulated by Dimitris Papadopoulos and Vassilis Tsianos, it is indisputable that migration is shaped by:

> Harsh, often deadly, realities of control. However, the point is migration is not just responding to them. Rather it creates new realities that allow migrants to exercise their own mobility against or beyond existing control. In this sense, the autonomy of migration thesis is about training our senses to see movement before capital (but not independent from it) and mobility before control (but not as disconnected from it) (2013, p. 184).

Or in the words of a young man who we met in the makeshift camp in Velika Kladuša in 2018: "No matter how much they stop us, turn us back and beat us, we will cross this

border, even if we have to dig a tunnel all the way to Italy." Indeed, as reported by Hungarian police, in 2020 migrants dug at least two tunnels under the Hungarian–Serbian fence in order to maintain the movement.

In contrast to the agency of migrants, approaches to border or migrant deaths are still predominantly focused on "non-agency" and marginalization sorely evident at every step of postmortem life of the "unwanted". In our ethnographic research, conducted since 2020 in border areas of Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, we were focused on silencing, marginalization and exclusion of border deaths. We struggled with how to understand graves scattered across border areas: graves at the margins of cemeteries in municipalities located close to state borders. We grappled with how to analytically approach markings poorly maintained or eroded over time, their markers indicating unidentified or anonymous deceased, their funerals attended by no one, sometimes even held at the crack of dawn. In this paper, we would like to shift our focus and contribute to the recently opened discussion (Kobelinsky, Furri & Noûs, 2021; Kobelinsky & Furri, 2023; Kobelinsky, 2020) related to the agency of the dead in the context of illegalized migration.

Border deaths, as premature and violent deaths, often involving very young people, at first provoke considerable action from authorities and come under the scrutiny of different public and state institutions. Police, firefighters, rescue services, state attorneys, pathologists, and municipal clerks attend the bodies of deceased migrants, if found. A number of different documents are issued, institutions alarmed and agencies involved. This agency and mobilization around the deceased may seem in contrast to the situation when they were alive and pushed into marginality and illegality. Nevertheless, this contrast is only apparent, since, as we demonstrate below, such mobilization remains highly limited and precarious. Our primary concern in this article is not marginalization and precarity per se, but rather a crucial parallel related to the separation of name or identity and the body that characterizes experiences of illegalized migrants. Forced into hiding and fabricating identities and names, rendered what Gabriel Gatti terms the "socially disappeared", their bodies are separated from their names, their names are cut off from their history, and stripped of their citizenship papers (Gatti 2020, pp. 47–48). Gatti's intervention, moreover, underscores that disappearances and related conditions, such as border deaths, should be understood as social phenomena rather than solely individual or physical occurrences. This division of name and body persists in specific ways beyond death and is constitutive for the agency of the dead as we will try to show in this article.

Separation and relatives searching for the body

The separation of relatives from the bodies of the deceased, and their subsequent search efforts, constitute crucial yet under-examined dimensions of border deaths that merit detailed analysis—particularly concerning the physical and structural conditions that generate this division. This separation from the physical remains of loved ones constitutes an almost default reality in transcontinental migrations discussed in this article. It originates in the physical separation of family members—those who knew the deceased—from the body of the deceased or missing. In most cases, the bereaved are located on one continent while death occurs on another. Vast distances, international borders, and bureaucratic barriers form the primary obstacles between mourners and the deceased. The journey to the distant place of death requires significant financial resources, specialized expertise, and documentation that is often hard to secure.

The deceased and the bereaved may be separated even in the absence of considerable spatial distance, as illustrated by the following two cases with which we became personally acquainted through our engagement in supporting the families of the deceased. On a winter night in 2022, two brothers from Afghanistan launched an inflatable boat onto the Sava River, attempting a clandestine crossing from Bosnia and Herzegovina into Croatia. At the outset of the crossing, one brother disappeared into the water, while the other abandoned the attempt and sought assistance from local police. He remained in Bosnia and Herzegovina for the following months, when his brother's body was recovered weeks later on the Croatian side. Although the body was found with a camp card bearing the missing brother's name, this documentation proved insufficient for official identification purposes. Official identification demanded DNA from a close relative—ideally a sibling or parent. The most obvious candidate was the surviving brother, the very one who had shared that river crossing. But he was stranded in Bosnia and Herzegovina with no legal avenue to enter Croatia. At times, only a few kilometers divided him from the hospital where his brother awaited identification—a distance made infinite by the border between them. Furthermore, national legal frameworks governing DNA collection and identification prevented him from providing a sample in Bosnia and Herzegovina that could be sent to Croatia for comparison. In other words, even his DNA sample was unable to cross the border and resolve this grievous limbo.[1]

[1] This postmortem itinerary (see Kobelinsky, 2019) inspired documentary film *Brat* by Vanja Stokić and Ajdin Kramber (2024).

The postmortem itinerary outlined above demonstrates how, even in instances where relatives are present at the time of death, their agency is restricted by the same border control regime that caused the death. Yet precisely because his agency was limited, it continuously multiplied through new attempts and connections. Unable to provide DNA himself, the brother contacted various actors who reached out to others; he explored different pathways and sought new ones, all to secure what seemed necessary for his brother's identification. In the end, identification was achieved through an uncle living in Europe, who came to Croatia and, after persistently visiting institutions, was able to attest to the identity of the deceased.

Beyond preventing relatives from reaching the body of the deceased, state borders—or more precisely, restrictive border regimes—can compel the separation of relatives from the body. Due to the lack of regular legal status and valid documents, relatives who are present at the moment of death and who attended the burial can be forced to continue their journeys and seek safe havens elsewhere, far from the graves of their loved ones. An interlocutor from a Slovenian NGO who arranged the burial of a newborn infant in 2021 explained to us that the infant's mother, as undocumented, "had to move on, so she was not present at the burial of her little girl's body, but I arranged a gravestone for her [child]." The contemporary border control system that directs migrants onto dangerous paths and into perilous situations—hiding under buses, in containers, and so on—fosters constant mobility. This forced hypermobility (Fontanari, 2018) and border controls separate the deceased from their companions, relatives, and friends, leaving bodies in distant places along migration trails.

Yet even knowing the location of burial assumes a degree of certainty many families lack. So far, we have discussed separation that pertains to cases where relatives know where the deceased is buried. However, many do not, and this represents a distinct form of separation from the deceased—one that calls for specific forms of agency in searching, mourning, and enduring the unknown. One of us has been in contact with several relatives who, months or years after their last communication with the missing, continue searching and inquiring about their loved ones. It is widely recognized that many, if not most, of the bodies that are found along migratory trails remain unidentified (e.g. Dearden et al., 2020, p. 57; Cattaneo et al., 2023; Tapella et al., 2016, p. 57).[2] Estimates of migration deaths vary, but there is consensus that the actual number of deaths far exceeds the number of bodies recovered. Many deaths in transit will likely remain hidden or sur-

[2] For data about border deaths, identified and unidentified bodies, see the 4D Database (n.d.) and the map of border deaths published on the e-ERIM platform (Hameršak, 2025a).

rounded by uncertainty; many bodies will never be found for various reasons. Group members and witnesses, if there are any, may fear sharing information with authorities or even relatives, as doing so could jeopardize their onward journey—one into which they have already invested everything and for which they have already lost so much. Beyond the risks of criminalization or delayed crossing further, reporting a death in Croatian and Slovenian contexts has for years posed the threat of deportation, expulsion and pushback. This happened to a group of Algerians who, as reported by Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN, n.d.), in March 2019, were detained in Croatia after reporting the death of a companion in a fall, and were subsequently expelled back to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

To avoid reporting, bodies may be buried en route—a practice documented elsewhere for European external land borders (Palęcka, 2024, p. 27) that likely occurs along the Balkan migratory trail as well. Bodies may simply be left behind. Subsequently, they may be removed, hidden, or thrown into rivers. One of us learned from a brother searching for his deceased sibling—whose body was left behind in swampy areas near the Croatia–Bosnia and Herzegovina border—that, according to what he heard, smugglers would dispose of bodies to keep their routes clear. As the brother explained: "if someone dies, then they clear their body. They put it in the river or they put it in the area where animals will eat it. Because they use the same route, like every day. So not to scare them [other people], they actually clear the path. They do not leave any dead bodies." Whether left behind or intentionally pushed into rivers or remote areas, bodies decompose over time due to environmental factors (temperatures, currents, water, structure of terrain, animals etc.), if not found. In this regard, Jason De León introduces the term necroviolence, a form of state-derived violence outsourced to nature and the destructive environment. Here "nature 'civilizes' the way the government deals with migrants; it does the dirty work" (De Léon 2015, p. 68). Yet for the dead, for their families and friends, and ultimately society itself, the consequence is the invisibility of bodies which, as already noted in studies of enforced disappearances, "enforces horror, and often, perhaps paradoxically, communicates a message of terror" (Baser et al., 2025, p. 7). At the emotional level, in cases of disappearances—but also in relation to border deaths more broadly and the separations discussed in this article—families are left in a state of prolonged grief, hope, and ambiguous loss, to use Pauline Boss' (2000) term. They are torn between hope and despair, awaiting news of the missing person, yet fearing it, since it could bring confirmation of death (Boss 2000, pp. 8–9). We could say they remain caught in emotional, administrative, material, and other forms of "in betweenness".

Relatives who reside in Europe or have financial means sometimes seek to bridge the described separation from the deceased through visits to the grave or site of disappearance. Such visits to the site of death, as we have observed from two cases we witnessed, may serve either to locate the body when it is not found, or to retrace the deceased's journey—potentially representing a step toward fuller acceptance of the loved one's death. One of us accompanied a mother to the grave of her repatriated son. The visit became more than a moment of private mourning—it was an encounter with the place where he now rests, and a tribute to others who died at borders and lie buried in the same cemetery. The mother parceled out her flowers, honoring each grave in turn. Yet, relatives most often visit graves soon upon learning of the death and burial. Employees in the municipal funeral services along the Slovenian–Croatian border were describing encounters with them in various ways. They felt the sadness and confusion of relatives—in these specific cases, sisters who were coming to places they had never heard of in a country they did not know. When taking them to the cemetery, they witnessed their prayers and cries: "Sister was doing something at the grave. Some ritual. She was mentioning Jesus", as one of employees summed up. Since relatives rarely manage to be physically present, municipal services have hardly any contact with them and, as we shall see in the next chapter, misunderstand their absence with indifference. However, in contrast to this notion of absence, an employee of one of Slovenia's municipal services describes:

> A few days after the accident, the deceased's relatives and acquaintances, who had been living as Syrian refugees in Germany, came to our office. When I looked out of the window, our yard was completely crowded with people who were coming to collect the body.... you don't see this every day.

Furthermore, some families strive to overcome their separation from the body or remains of the deceased by initiating repatriation, an often expensive and administratively demanding process. During our fieldwork we could observe that this process became more or less standardized in terms of procedures and actors, at least for some groups such as the Moroccan citizens who died in Croatia and in Slovenia. Repatriation (returning the body to the country of origin), heavily depends on the economic fortune of the deceased person's family. It also depends on whether a family member can physically come to the country where the person died, contact the police and other services. Additionally, the process is influenced by the agility, policies, and interests of the embassies of the country of origin, as well as the connectedness and presence of communities from the originating country in the country where the death occurred or in its vicinity.

Informal solidarity networks sometimes support repatriation efforts, and repatriation itself may be politicized, revealing how border deaths weave together the intimate and the political. The family of the woman from Ethiopia who died in Poland after authorities ignored calls for help decided that she should be repatriated.

> The repatriation of the body was crowdfunded and organized especially quickly by POPH—in just two weeks. As is customary, the relatives did not eat before the burial. In Ethiopia her funeral turned into a demonstration where mourners demanded "justice from Poland and the Border Guard (Palęcka 2024, p. 64).

A systematic analysis of activist initiatives supporting families and facilitating repatriation in the Balkans—such as the work of Nihad Suljuć, selma banich, and organizations such as Klikaktiv—has yet to be undertaken. Here, activist work intersects with the emotional dimension. When family members develop trust with local activists facilitating repatriation, visual documentation of funerals and commemorative vigils circulates between them, occasionally forging lasting bonds.

Whether through visits to graves, repatriation efforts, or sustained searches, what unites the deaths we have traced is that, from the perspective of kin, they set in motion multiple trajectories—not only physical and administrative journeys, but also emotional quests. The physical and administrative dimensions have already been touched upon in the text, but let us pause on them briefly. Upon receiving information from group members, friends, or authorities about a death or disappearance, families begin a long and too often unresolved process of searching for a body, information, and answers. Communication chains are set in motion; messages are sent to acquaintances and relatives in Europe and the country of disappearance. Fragmented information circulates, calls to institutions follow one after another: hospital pathology departments, the police etc. Local activists who engage in these efforts often hear back from hospital or police employees that all available information has already been communicated multiple times to those who previously contacted them. Our interlocutor from an NGO in Slovenia, who has experience in the search for missing persons, notes that the conditions to start searching

> are very bureaucratic: the first condition is that for the person who is missing, somebody is staying in our country—this is where it gets stuck first, because many of the witnesses move on, and their relatives are living abroad; the second condition is that they are related, the closer the relationship, the better, but often it is a "travel companion" who witnesses the disappearance, not a relative. The third condition is that all ties with the person have been severed.

Paradoxically, regulations for the protection, collection, and sharing of personal data, the focus on DNA samples and comparisons, as well as the efficiency of services (in the case of quick burials), can, in practice, hinder or even prevent identification (Perl, 2016, p. 204). Therefore, as Ville Laakkonen emphasizes (2022, p. 4), instead of talking about the unidentification of the deceased in migration, we can talk about institutionalized non-identification.

Many participate in these searches, not only relatives in strict sense. In fact, group members are usually the ones who issue calls for help in the case of distress, who alarm authorities, activists, and families, and who, in order to push action forward, act as relatives—literally and metaphorically. As we were told by an employee of the municipal organizations: "Someone from his family came [when they were preparing the burial], but when they heard how much it costs, they just said he's not one of them and disappeared." The employee explained this as disinterest on the part of relatives, but from our experience we would rather assume that they were not relatives, but friends who presented themselves as such. Acts of group members and friends are based on bonds made with the deceased or disappeared along the journey, sometimes supported by being from the same country, area or village as deceased or disappeared. These "kinships based on journeys" fall apart, for example, when "kins by the journey" are asked to do blood tests to support identification or, as mentioned, to pay funeral costs. In response to restrictive border control regimes extended family can activate.

Family members who reside in Europe and who can more easily come to Croatia or Slovenia are under special pressure. Even in brief encounters with some of them during their visits it was evident that this one family member is, in fact, representative of the whole family. That relative acts as the representative of the family, at least in cases in which we were involved, on behalf and by request of the parent of the disappeared, the mother in both cases we are aware of. Sometimes different relatives are engaged and sometimes only one. That one postpones his life and work to fulfill the task he was given. For Javed, who came to Croatia to support the identification of his sister's son's body (his nephew), every single day more in Croatia had the meaning of every day closer to the closure of his restaurant in North Europe. Ever growing administrative procedures, the language barrier, unfamiliarity with the context and above all the burden of tasks he was to fulfill at the plea of the grieving mother of the deceased young man, made him entangled in the constant tension between being almost at the end of the procedure and feelings of constant prolonging of this end.

Border deaths or disappearances can generate different types of mobilization, including political action. Nouman Nazir, residing in Spain, submitted a complaint to the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances concerning the disappearance of his brother Adnan Nazir while in transit through Croatia, near the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina. More than a year after his disappearance, Nouman continues searching for his brother and still with great hope, contacts not only the police, but also activists and journalists whom he hopes will help him answer the question: "What happened to my brother? How did he disappear?" (Opačić, 2024; N1 BIH, n.d.). Yet even when the body of the deceased is found, identified, and relatives are officially informed about the circumstances of death, families remain literally at a distance with many unanswered questions. Sometimes, as was the case for the late Yasser Bendahou Idrissi, a rap singer from Morocco who died in the Mrežnica River on his way to the Slovenian border, families seek support from local NGOs or issue petitions for reopening investigations into the deaths of their loved ones in transit (Noureddine, n.d.).

Additionally, border deaths are increasingly becoming part of the migration industry, a phenomenon we have observed intensifying in recent years (Pozniak & Župarić-Iljić, 2025). This manifests not only in the growing attention paid to them by IGOs, NGOs, and researchers, but also in their commodification within the smuggling industry. For example, Serbian NGO KlikaAktiv

> documented troubling reports from the field suggesting that some smugglers now offer so-called "premium packages." These include a guarantee that, in the event of a drowning, the body will be identified, buried under the correct name, and that the family will receive a video as confirmation. This practice highlights the extent to which profit is extracted—even from death. According to several funeral service providers, many of the individuals who come forward are indeed genuine relatives. However, they also reported encountering situations where they suspected that someone might be trying to profit from the family's tragedy, taking thousands of euros from them to identify and bury their loved ones. It appears that those individuals are closely connected with smuggling networks which are facilitating border crossings (Radivojević, 2025).

Everything discussed thus far has been approached from the perspective of how families navigate these circumstances within Europe. This analysis emerges from what we have witnessed, heard, and read, and from our direct encounters with relatives of the deceased—encounters in which we have accompanied them through institutional labyrinths: interpreting exchanges with police officers, arranging interpreters for non-

English speakers, helping articulate requests for further investigation (searches of areas where the disappeared were last seen, inquiries into investigative outcomes, calls for database checks and DNA sampling, among other actions families undertake in their search for answers). Therefore, this article leaves unaddressed what unfolds 'at home'—the more intimate, everyday dimensions of separation and loss. How families navigate daily life bearing the weight of separation, carrying the administrative and emotional burdens we have traced, lies beyond our present scope. So too does the question of how they live with the symbolic, immaterial presence of the dead.

The symbolic return or re-appearances of the dead and disappeared—particularly in dreams—represent a distinct and important dimension for understanding the agency of the dead. The appearance of the deceased in dreams unfolds beyond the dreamer's control, arising instead from the agency, or "will", of the dead. The phenomenon is well-documented in the literature on disappearance (e.g. Schindel, 2014). Ethnographic accounts from other borders offer glimpses into this realm. Carolina Kobelinsky (2020) discusses stories about "border beings" circulating at the border between Melilla and Morocco. Ibrahim Camara, a young Fulani man from Guinea, told her:

> that he was in Melilla thanks to a dead person. Ibrahim was convinced that it was Alhassane Diallo who helped him scale the fences. In a dream, this 20-year-old Guinean had told him "Petit, you'll give it everything in the next strike and it will be Boza" [the victory cry when crossing successfully]. With a big smile on his face, Ibrahim added: "He was right, I thought about him, I was so focused, I didn't let go, and I hit the ground in Melilla, I ran with all my strength, he gave me strength, and he protected me."He had never dreamed about Alhassane before (Kobelinsky, 2020, p. 8).

Traces of this sort of agency emerged in our fieldwork when we learned of twenty-year-old Arat from Afghanistan, who died in the Sava River in November 2022. Initially, he was buried at the Orthodox cemetery in Banja Luka, but months later, upon the family's request, he was relocated and buried in the Muslim cemetery in Kamičani in the municipality of Prijedor. The relocation brought resolution not only in material terms. As his mother told an activist who supported the family, Arat came to her in dreams after his reburial. In dreams, "he was standing under the rainbow, settled and relaxed". Prior to this, Arat's family had been, as we learned through a journalist's interview with relatives in Europe:

> in tremendous pain, yet at least they knew where their son was and that he had been buried according to religious tradition. For Payman, it was essential that the

> grave marks Arat's death as that of a migrant. "Every day in Europe, people die fleeing countries where life is impossible. In Europe, their dreams are buried" (Matejčić, 2023).

Throughout these accounts—of transcontinental clandestine journeys, of spatial distances separating the dead from their families, of borders closed in life and death, of disappeared, of *ad hoc* kinships, of the business of death, of the dead appearing in dreams—separation reveals its dual nature. It is both a symptom of the repressive border regime and, to use Laura Huttunen's framing, a potentially productive anomalous state:

> making things happen in social worlds of those left behind. Unaccounted absences give rise to projects of searching for the missing and giving explanations for their absences, but also to political projects demanding accountability and memorializing the missing. All these projects make the disappeared "reappear", in one way or another (2025, p. 79).

Here, the agency of the dead springs from the tension born of separation between body and relatives, from the unreachable body. It manifests in families' varied attempts to reach the body, get in contact, gather information, and attain closure—all of which remain difficult to achieve given the violent, premature nature of the deaths and the enforced separation between the deceased and their families.

Locals searching for the name

Border deaths also directly or indirectly affect local populations. In contrast to the previous chapter, where we drew on our research across the broader Balkan region and its many borders, here we narrow our focus. Our discussion of the agency of deceased migrants in relation to locals draws on fieldwork conducted in a narrower geographical area, along the Kolpa/Kupa River, in the border area between Slovenia and Croatia. This fieldwork, which began in the spring of 2021 and is still ongoing, consists of repeated visits to this border area and in person exchanges, formal interviews and informal conversations with locals in both Slovenia and Croatia.

During our fieldwork it quickly emerged that at least two groups of locals engage with border deaths: residents and employees of local institutions such as municipalities and municipal services (*komunalne službe*). Although their roles in relation to migrants' deaths are different, the presence of deceased migrants is a rather new phenomenon for both and is challenging them on many levels. When confronted with the bodies of migrants, they they must grapple with questions such as: to what extent are they prepared

to be in contact with the dead bodies? In what way are they supposed to be engaged in postmortem activities? How are these bodies affecting them? Another common trait is that they must take responsibility for burying and sometimes remembering a stranger, someone they did not know. The search for the answers to these questions is usually through many uncertainties and ambiguities.

Over the past years an important change in the attitude of local residents could be observed. At the beginning of our fieldwork in Bela Krajina, a region in Slovenia along the Kolpa/Kupa River, in May 2021 almost no local resident mentioned border deaths, with the exception of a few employees at the local organizations who were in direct contact with deceased migrants as part of their job duties (e.g. firefighters who lifted the bodies from the river or employees of a municipal service who were in charge of their burial). In the cases when they seemed more knowledgeable, we tried to share with them what we knew about the deaths in their vicinity. On several occasions we seemed more informed on the subject than local inhabitants and the overall impression was that these deaths were socially marginalized, hidden, present almost on a semi-conscious level.

However, four years later, the picture was quite different, although the number of deaths per year was not higher than in the past and these phenomena were not getting more media or other type of attention. When conducting the fieldwork in April 2024, many local residents were persistently bringing up this topic and the impression was that migrants' deaths were omnipresent in this region, almost as an integral part of the landscape. Similar are the findings in the Mediterranean, Aegean areas, where Kobelinsky, Furri and Noûs (2021, p. 711) showed how "as a direct effect of hardline securitization policies and techniques of migration control (Albahari, 2015; Weber & Pickering, 2011) deaths have formed part of the landscape around the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas for several years now" (Kobelinsky, Furri & Noûs, 2021, p. 711)—a reality that has now persisted for well over a decade.

Some interlocutors had direct experience of seeing the body in the river and being present at the scene, while others were learning about the drownings in the river Kolpa/Kupa by other locals or the media. By the way they were talking, it was clear that they were troubled by these events. Some were expressing sadness that this happens so often or a feeling of discomfort and anxiety that bodies are found in such close proximity to their homes; others were surprised that so many young people drown in the river Kolpa/Kupa. One local living near the place where the drowning occurred was speaking about the "unsettling feeling" that changed her summer routine: "I don't feel well swimming in the river anymore." She also explained that certain parts of this river are

known for its eddies and its depth, which increases with heavy rainfall, but other parts are less dangerous. This is why she was wondering: "I don't understand why they are not crossing there?" This interlocutor, like some others, see these deaths as a humanitarian problem, not a political one (Kovras & Robins, 2017, p. 167). Yet local residents are rarely conscious that the border area between Slovenia and Croatia—due to continuous presence of police, numerous surveillance cameras, drones with thermovision—became for illegalized migrants a highly controlled and weaponized landscape (Hameršak & Pleše, 2021). This is why irregularized migrants are forced to walk along forests, often during the night, in snow or rain, crossing the river in places where the presence of the police is less probable, and not being able to avoid river's vortexes and wild currents.

Even when locals are aware of deaths, they are very often unaware of graves of migrants in the surrounding areas. Since these graves are often at the edges of the cemeteries, sometimes in the graveyards that today are rarely used due to local depopulation, they can easily go unnoticed by most residents. When locals learn of these graves, they sometimes express a relief that burials occured "not by us, but in another cemetery"—often used by ethnic and religious minorities in that area. Also for other local residents the process of "Othering" does not stop with death, but continues or even intensifies afterwards. Locals who are involved in anti-migration and securitization (Huysmans, 2000, 2006) discourses and activities, sometimes stress the fear that border deaths will diminish tourism or bring a shame or other "problems" on their region. As a man from Slovenia said to us in front of his weekend house on the "Croatian" shore of river Kolpa/Kupa sharing without reservation his prejudices and racialised views: "It's all organized. There are always a lot of SIM cards here. Recently, there was quite a show. Firefighters, special forces, they pulled out one black (*jednog crnog*)".

However, there are residents showing different attitudes towards border-crossers. Although the process of criminalization of solidarity with migrants has intensified in the recent decades, some residents living in the vicinity of the places where border crossers are transiting, continue to provide for their basic needs, help them to find the safest way to cross the border and try to rescue them in case of drowning. These rescue attempts are rarely successful, due to different factors, the main being hardline securitization policies, as one of the locals states:

> These boys are not drowning because they do not know how to swim—some of them are good swimmers. The problem is that they fear the police, they are in a panic and they begin to move too fast, and then they panic even more.

By witnessing how the "drowning of the boys" is a direct consequence of a deadly border regime, these locals begin to heavily doubt the fairness of the contemporary political system as well as expressing feelings of "shared humanity" (Kobelinsky, Furri & Noûs, 2021, p. 716) towards drowned men. This was especially clear when talking to Nada Šimunić, who lives on the shore of the Kolpa/Kupa river and who is very critical about the police and border controls. She emphasized, showing to us the flow of the river, in front of her house:

> There had never been any drownings here in the Kupa before. A maid from Croatia drowned before World War II. The boat capsized. The Kupa is not dangerous, but you have to know it.

Last September, she heard screams in Arabic and, together with her family members, ran to the river where:

> there is one guy crying and pointing into the river. I see a body lying at the bottom of the river. We immediately called an emergency. My son jumps in and pulls the body on the side. Then his girlfriend, my son, my partner and me somehow pull him out and immediately give him CPR [artificial respiration and cardiac massage]. The first emergency team arrives 15 minutes later... but they could not save the man. The migrant who was with him said that the dead man was his cousin and that they are from Morocco.

In the next few days all her family were having trouble sleeping, they kept thinking about this traumatic experience and continued to worry that it would happen again—that "a boy would drown again" as Nada said. Several days later, when Nada was showing us the spot where the young Moroccan man died, and remembering his motionless body in the water, her experience seemed similar to those of locals in Sicily. Namely, when facing numerous bodies found at sea that were taken to the city of Catania, a small group of residents became involved in a search for their names and biographies. In this way locals expressed a form of hospitality towards the dead. As they became involved in this search, they formed affective ties with the deceased and went through a particular grieving process "what could be referred to as a form of mourning by proxy" (Kobelinsky, Furri & Noûs, 2021, p. 713). However, in the conversations with Nada and with some other interlocutors, the agency of the dead migrants could be seen in locals' disturbing experiences and in their particular forms of grieving, but also in growing political consciousness. After witnessing the drowning of young men these interlocutors are not only expressing doubts about the contemporary political system, but also denouncing the cruelty of migration regimes as well as planning new forms of soli-

darity such as to establish a common network with the activists and NGOs from Slovenia and Croatia to inform them about the new occurrences of border deaths.

Another group of locals that has contact with dead migrants are the employees in the local organizations. These range from firefighters, who are usually in charge of lifting the remains of a drowned person out of the river, to healthcare workers who determine their death, to police officers who conduct the investigation, and, finally, to municipal services that are in charge of the remains. While most of the procedures immediately after death follow established national protocols as dictated by the law, much more ambiguity emerges when the body is transferred back to the local territory. For example, similar to Croatian law (Law on Cemeteries/*Zakon o grobljima* in Croatian), Slovenian law (Law on Funeral and Cemetery Services/*Zakon o pogrebni in pokopališki dejavnosti* in Slovenian, Uradni list RS, 62716, 30.9.2016) determines that: "If the last temporary residence cannot be established, the municipality where the person died or was found has to register the burial" (Uradni list RS, 2016, Article 13) and has to pay the burial costs as well as cover the cost of the grave for the next 10 years.

In this last episode of the postmortem phase, local municipalities and municipal services often face numerous uncertainties. When confronted with migrants' bodies they are left to their own devices, with no official or other guidelines regarding how to preserve remains, where to bury them and how to mark their graves. In cases when the body is without a name, i.e. without identity or any biographical information, employees struggle even more with knowing how to pay tribute to the deceased. It seems that in these situations the agency of the dead comes out of the tension that results in the separation between the physical body that is present in the local environment and the absence of the deceased person's name—his or her identity. While the interlocutors in Slovenian and Croatian municipal services openly admitted that in cases of migrant bodies they felt "uncertain" and "confused", they also explained how unidentified, anonymous deceased usually provoked considerable action. In the first cases of the unidentified dead this action was difficult to plan, since they "did not know how to proceed, where to turn for help", and eventually they realized that they had to find the answers themselves. As noted by many (e.g. Hameršak, 2025b), when alive, illegalized migrants' every step is controlled, regulated and codified in the EU. In death, however, functional procedures for handling their remains are absent.

Some interlocutors in municipal services, in one of our repeated encounters over time, stressed their "pioneering role" and being some of the first municipalities where people who died in transit were buried. As it seemed to us, this impression was primarily based

on the fact that these municipalities were the first ones in which border deaths had been recorded, rather than in exchange with other, neighboring municipalities and sharing experiences and knowledge with them. In fact, communication between neighboring municipal services was rarer than we expected. They all, nevertheless, stressed the special place of these deaths in their everyday work. Some of them, for example, speak about taking care of migrants' graves as "personal projects"; others stress that the municipality introduced a new category in the next year's budget for migrant burials. They also highlight their engagement in a number of decisions related to these burials, such as deciding what is seen as an appropriate grave mark or putting a plastic document holder with information about the body in the coffin. In sum, they invested significant time and energy, which may not be evident on the ground, in developing procedures and protocols which they today, in retrospect, see as functional.

In some other municipal services, quite the opposite occurs: migrants' bodies provoked securitization and anti-migrant attitudes. In describing the postmortem procedures regarding dead migrants, their employees pointed out that these "are not our dead" and that they come from societies radically different from those of Europe, relying on racialized stereotypes such as: "I see a problem because nobody socialized these people; they carry Kalashnikovs since childhood." In this contexts even the topic of our research was called into question and some interlocutors openly expressed astonishment and disapproval of our research topic. One of them, who vehemently promoted anti-migration discourse, saw our interest in the "foreign dead" as a sign of indifference to "our dead": "Why are you even bothering with this subject? Why are you not researching [dead] Slovene people who are social welfare cases?"

Despite the above mentioned differences, when facing bodies with no or little biographical data, the municipal services on both shores of the Kolpa/Kupa river assumed that someone is still searching for the deceased, so they decided to not cremate the body, even though this would usually be the cheapest procedure. At the same time, they often assumed that dead migrants were Muslims, even if they couldn't verify this information. In some municipal services they were also aware that cremation would be against the Muslim tradition of burying the deceased. Furthermore, some of them anticipated that the deceased could be found by relatives who could plan to exhume the body, as the head of one municipal service in Slovenia states:

> Can you imagine relatives coming to me and telling me that they would like to take him home? And then I show them the urn? That's why I insist on a traditional burial with the corpse in the coffin, even though it is more expensive. I

have some annoyances about it, I have to explain things a bit more, but as long as I'm here, that's the way it's going to be.

Similarly, the interlocutors from different municipal services usually assumed that marking the grave with a Christian cross would not be acceptable in these cases. In the absence of any protocol on how to mark the grave and what to write on this mark, the employees from Croatian municipal service were explaining how they "repeatedly debated among themselves" which symbol to use and even "Googling" other cemeteries to see how they mark "unknown persons" (see also Krampl, 2024). However, as there appears to be almost no communication between the municipal services along the River Kolpa/Kupa, border crossers' graves are differently marked in different cemeteries.

The most common grave mark is a wooden "pyramid", but sometimes wooden crosses are used. Sometimes "new" symbols are developed, such as metal plates made by a local craftsman or wooden rectangular panels. Furthermore these markers are often impermanent. During the period of our research marks at some graves started to fall apart, due to humidity and time, some lost inscriptions or color, and some were moved by municipal services because they were completely destroyed, leaving initially marked graves unmarked.

In the absence of the deceased's name, municipal services decided to put the inscription "unknown person" (*neznana oseba*) or a standardized sign for unknown person "N.N." followed most often with the date of finding or burial, and sometimes the location of finding. As the interlocutors explained, when deciding upon different symbols, grave marks, they wanted them to be "as neutral as possible", which was also the explanation in the case of a Christian cross where it could be argued that they use the same symbol "as on all other graves". Simultaneously, at the same time, in some municipalities the same not knowing was used as an excuse for not putting any mark at all.

However, also in the municipal services where their attitudes towards dead migrants was never negative during our conversations, we could observe questionable decisions regarding how to organize the funeral for the deceased migrant, in which part of the cemetery they should be buried, and how to deal with the grave after burial. Namely, their choices regarding these issues may be described as exclusion and marginalization: either by temporal marginalization such as burials organized at dawn (e.g. some burials happened at 6 am, without giving the possibility to those potentially interested to be present), or spatial marginalization (e.g. the graves of border crossers are usually found at the edge of the cemeteries, near fences, woods or garbage dumps). One of the employees of the municipal services described these graves as "somehow special" (*nekako*

posebni) and therefore placed together and aside, we would add. It could be said that migrants' marginality during their life continues after death and they continue to be excluded in relation to the citizens, whose place in the cemeteries reflects "moral precedence over the foreigners" (Kovras & Robins, 2017, p. 167).

Concluding thoughts

In our research of the border deaths we came across an unexpected separation. On the one hand, we encountered people—relatives, friends and travel companions dispersed across continents—who are seeking bodies and information about their loved ones who died or disappeared along the journey. On the other hand, we met local residents and employees of local organizations who are taking care of the migrants' bodies, but lacking a name or meaningful biographical references in case when name was known. This dual separation leaves relatives unable to mourn in the presence of the deceased, while locals at burial sites face their own dilemma: how to care for and commemorate someone whose identity remains completely unknown to them. Additionally, the geographical distance or separation between these two groups is usually significant, and there seems to be no effective network and protocol that would connect those who are searching for the body of a loved person with those who are looking for the name of the deceased. This creates a dramatic disequilibrium, a tragic Cartesian dichotomy separating body from identity. On one side there is usually a great amount of information, memories and emotions connected with the missing person, but no physical trace; on the other, merely the nameless body or its remains.

In this article we tried to show that this striking separation between the name or identity of the deceased and his or her body, produces agency. Here the agency of the dead comes out of the tension generated and maintained by the separation of the body and name of the deceased which is, in the end, produced and maintained by the border regime and its racialized logic. Due to this separation, in one part of the world relatives and friends are using all possible resources to obtain any information about their dearest ones, while in the other locals are facing many questions and doubts when deciding on how to pay tribute to the nameless deceased. Without this separation, relatives would not struggle with an ambiguous loss (Boss, 2000) nor would they try to get in touch with national and international authorities and organizations and activists, or sending one of the family members to embark on a long and costly journey to visit the grave or find the body. Neither would locals be confronted with deaths in their vicinity, which cause them

feeling of discomfort, anxiety and sadness; nor would municipal services have to question the universality of their burial practices or the symbols on the graves.

As we tried to indicate along the paper, this separation that we persistently encountered during our ethnographic work is not a politically neutral phenomenon, but a direct consequence of the necropolitical migration regime. Similarly to Estela Schindel (2020, p. 202) who sometimes substitutes the term agency with resistance, in some of our accounts we also could use these two words as synonyms. Namely, agency becomes resistance when thinking of a dead body who resists to rest in peace and to be forgotten, buried in a country in which (s)he was denied entry, was persecuted by the police or was cruelly pushed back over the national border to another state. Moreover, the agency of the dead, which comes from separation between body and name, urges relatives to search for the deceased, to visit sites of death and graves, to initiate repatriation, to appeal to UN committees or start petitions, as well as bring deceased in the dreams of relatives. It can also trigger the resistance of local witnesses of drownings: as a result of traumatic experiences while trying to rescue a drowning man, some locals developed political consciousness that not only expresses through denunciation of the cruelty of the migration regime, but also in new forms of resistance to it.

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AI disclaimer

The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence was used in the preparation of this manuscript.

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Povzetek

V migracijski krajini vzdolž tako imenovane balkanske poti je v zadnjem desetletju zelo veliko smrti na mejah. V članku se bova osredotočili na te smrti in pokazali, da je z njimi povezana presenetljiva ločitev identitete (v smislu imena in biografije) in telesa. Pri tem bova dokazovali, da je ta ločitev posledica migracijskih politik in mejnega režima, pa tudi delovanja umrlih. Na eni strani sorodniki zaradi fizične oddaljenosti, pomanjkanja informacij in v nekaterih primerih izginotij s težavo žalujejo za pokojnim, ne da bi imeli stik z njegovim oziroma njenim telesom. Na drugi strani pa lokalni prebivalci zaradi dejanske odsotnosti imena, ker pokojni niso identificirani, na krajih smrti težko ustrezno poskrbijo za pokojne in jim izkažejo spoštovanje, ne da bi poznali njihovo ime, njihov družbeni obstoj. Na podlagi etnografskega raziskovanja smrti na mejah vzdolž t. i. balkanske poti, ki se mu posvečava od 2020 dalje, analizirava, kako delovanje mrtvih izhaja iz prizadevanj žalujočih sorodnikov, ki iščejo telesa, in lokalnih prebivalcev, ki pri izkazovanju spoštovanja umrlemu iščejo njegovo ime. Delovanje umrlih se tako kaže na različne načine – od prizadevanj za identifikacijo in repatriacijo ter pritožb mednarodnim organom do oblikovanja protokolov pokopa in spominskih praks. Pri tem mejni režim s svojo rasizirano logiko ločevanja in hierarhičnosti ustvarja in ohranja to ločitev med imenom in telesom, s čimer se družbeno izginjanje migrantov še krepi. Paradoksalno pa ta prisilna ločitev ustvarja tudi oblike upora in širitve politične zavesti, tako med svojci umrlih kot tudi med lokalnimi pričami smrti na mejah.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: smrti na mejah, telo, ime, balkanska pot, delovanje mrtvih, sorodniki, lokalci

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