

<b>Institution:</b> Aston University		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 25 Area Studies		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Informing policy-makers, advocacy organisations, NGOs and public debate about the injustices suffered by asylum seekers and migrants on Europe's Balkan borders		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 15 November 2015 – 19 September 2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Jelena Obradovic-Wochnik	Senior Lecturer	1 September 2009 – present
Amanda Russell Beattie	Senior Lecturer	1 September 2008 – present
Patrycja Rozbicka	Lecturer	1 August 2015 – present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> November 2018 – January 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b>		
<p>Research into injustices facing migrants in South Eastern Europe (SEE) has:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. changed United Kingdom and European migration policy and advocacy;</li> <li>B. rebalanced public perception on migration by countering mainstream media; and</li> <li>C. enabled aid NGOs to adapt to the wider context they operate in.</li> </ul> <p>Research findings show that migrants crossing through SEE experience <i>border security</i> policies as violent, and face systematic obstructions to their legal right for asylum. Impacts were realised by sharing research findings with government and civil society through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• submissions and presentations of evidence to UK and EU policymakers;</li> <li>• exhibitions in public galleries, and publications in online news and analysis media; and</li> <li>• presentations to, and workshops with, NGOs.</li> </ul>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b>		
<p>The underpinning research examined refugee journeys through South Eastern Europe (SEE); specifically how displaced people experience structural barriers and policy mechanisms of <i>border security</i>, including reception centres, detention and violence.</p> <p>Key research findings were that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>refugees stranded in SEE are routinely subjected to hostility as a form of control: both physical violence (R1) and less direct, systemic harm;</b> such as denial of aid, food or medical care. Refugees are forcibly displaced; either from urban centres to remote reception centres (R2-5) or <i>pushed-back</i> – often violently – from EU borders into Bosnia and Serbia, and so denied their legal right to claim asylum (R1).</li> <li>• <b>funding by the EU of non-EU countries underpins employment of border security staff and construction of infrastructure to push refugees back (R1).</b> Together with the EU's border closures, such funding and discontinued funding of independent aid organisations are key factors causing dangerously over-crowded reception centres with sub-standard accommodation, poor sanitation and food shortages, whilst also discouraging – even criminalising – other types of aid, like food provision by NGOs (R1-3, R5).</li> <li>• <b>medical aid to those wounded by violent push-backs is crucially undertaken by NGOs (R1).</b> NGOs were also shown to be vital for providing day-to-day welfare services to refugees inside and outside EU-funded reception centres (R1-3, R5).</li> </ul> <p>Whilst reports of border violence and denial of right to claim asylum have been compiled by local and international NGOs since at least 2017, and living conditions for refugees across Europe are generally known to be poor, our research has proven that both violence and poor living conditions are systemic practices SEE border authorities implement to discourage and manage migration (R1-R5).</p>		

These findings for SEE make the research original and stem from the knowledge we generated through underpinning fieldwork (2015-2019) comprising 10 trips by Obradovic-Wochnik to Serbia and Bosnia, and three to Greece; and two trips each to Greece by Beattie and Rozbicka. Research was undertaken in five asylum/reception centres and camps in Serbia, Bosnia and Greece, and documented over 100 interviews with groups and individuals including: national and EU officials migration policy officials, international humanitarian organisations, grassroots organisations, NGOs, social workers, reception centre staff, medical staff, volunteers, refugees, and housing officers.

The research was collaborative and drew upon Dr Obradovic-Wochnik's uniting of separate research teams working on distinct, but overlapping projects:

- i. **Refugee Journeys/International Relations Aesthetics:** examines lived, everyday conditions in reception centres and informal housing, and grassroots support. Researchers: Dr Jelena Obradovic-Wochnik, Dr Amanda Beattie, Dr Patrycja Rozbicka, Dr Gemma Bird (University of Liverpool).
- ii. **Border Violence:** examines geographical dimensions of perpetrated violence, grassroots support networks and implications of outsourcing EU border security to non-EU countries. Researchers: Dr Jelena Obradovic-Wochnik, Dr Arshad Isakjee (University of Liverpool), Dr Thom Davies (University of Nottingham).

It is estimated that Aston researchers contributed to 65-85% of this collaborative research.

The common message from these ongoing projects is that the EU and national member state policies targeting border security and refugee containment in EU and non-EU reception centres in SEE are inherently violent and harmful to displaced people. They are contributing to poor living conditions, further displacement, vulnerability and destitution (R1-R5).

### 3. References to the research

**R1:** Isakjee, A., J. Obradovic-Wochnik, T. Davies and K. Augustova, Liberal Violence and the Racial Borders of the European Union (2020), *Antipode: a Radical Journal of Geography*, 52:6, 1751–1773, <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12670>

**R2:** Obradovic-Wochnik, Jelena and Gemma Bird (2019) The Everyday at the Border: examining the visual, material and spatial intersections of international politics along 'the Balkan Route' *Cooperation and Conflict* 55 (1) 41-65 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836719882475>

**R3:** Obradovic-Wochnik, Jelena (2018) Urban geographies of the refugee crisis: biopolitics, neoliberalism and contestation over public space in Belgrade *Political Geography* 67 (7) 65-75 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2018.08.017>

**R4:** Beattie, A 2016, Storytelling as 'unorthodox' agency: negotiating 2012 family immigration rules (United Kingdom) *Politics* 37 (3), 302-316 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395716686599>

**R5:** Bird, G., J. Obradovic-Wochnik, A. Beattie, P. Rozbicka, (2020) 'Badlands' of the 'Balkan Routes': policy and spatial effects on refugee housing *Global Policy*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12808>

The minimum 2-star quality of the research is shown by its publication by 5 highly ranked, peer-reviewed journals, and its external funding by the Antipode Foundation's Scholar Activist Award. Aston's contribution for fieldwork through funding by the Aston Centre for Europe was £4,000 over 3 years for all three researchers.

### 4. Details of the impact

**Stakeholder groups**, with examples, benefitting from our research include:

- **UK policy makers:** Parliament Select Committee on Migration
- **NGOs and advocacy organisations:** European Council on Refugees and Exiles, Médecins Sans Frontières
- **public worldwide:** exhibition visitors in Canada, England, Italy, New Zealand, Sweden; readers of online publications.

These wide-ranging stakeholders now better understand the ongoing conditions encountered by refugees in SEE, and this has led to impacts in:

### A. Influencing and changing UK and European migration policies and advocacy

After we co-organised with the [European Council on Refugees and Exiles](#) (ECRE) the *Respecting Human Rights at the Border Roundtable* (Brussels, September 2019), and presented our findings on how violence is used to manage borders (later published as **R1**), an anonymised **humans rights advocate** from an EU member state commented how our event:

*...reinforced our resolve to tackle the issue of immigrants [sic] rights and access to institutional protection. (S1:p.1)*

Another attendee, from the [Centre for Peace Studies](#) (Croatia), stated how:

*...it has allowed me to take into consideration some perspectives that were not known before. (S1:p.3)*

**ECRE** used our event-presented research (**R1**) to help compose their new policy note (**S2**) (Fig. 1), and testified how:

*The cooperation with Jelena Obradovic-Wochnik (Aston University), Karolina Augustova (Aston University), as well as Arshad Isakjee (University of Liverpool) and Thom Davies (University of Nottingham) has supported ECRE in deepening its understanding of the situation of violence at the EU's borders. The roundtable...provided the opportunity to present and discuss policy recommendations to address the specific situation of violence at the Croatian border. This exchange, together with the research findings [R1] greatly informed the development of ECRE's Policy Note [S2] which was published in November 2019 and has since then been widely distributed and referenced in discussions about the situation in Croatia and the need to reform the Schengen framework (S3).*

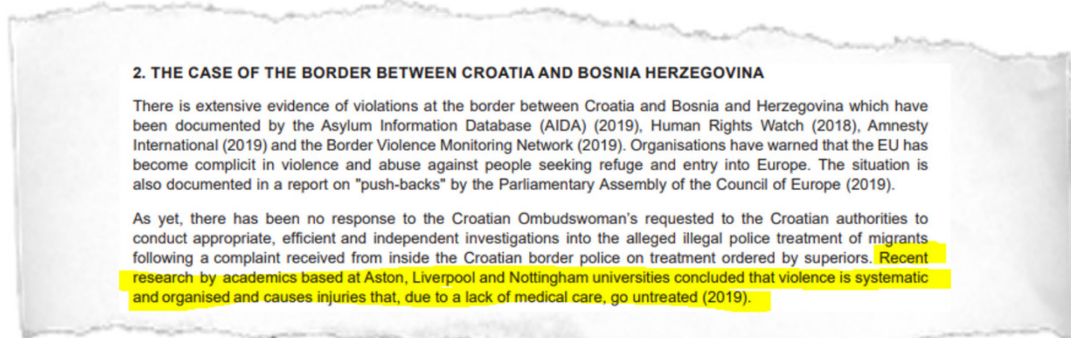


Figure 1. ECRE's citation of our research (**R1**) in **S2:p.2**.

Our contribution towards changing UK migration policy is demonstrable by four citations of [our evidence submission](#) in the report on irregular migration made by the **UK House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee** (HoC) (**S4:pp.8-9,11,19**), as drawn from our research on the poor living conditions and systemic barriers obstructing asylum claims in Greece and France (**R1-R5**). Due to our evidence, the HoC Committee raised inquiries within UK government departments on spending to improve migrant conditions (**S4:p.9,footnote37**), also recommending that:

*...the UK should work closely with French authorities to improve the conditions for migrants. It should ensure efficient processing of asylum claims by those with relatives in the UK... (S4:p.20,para.3)*

### B. Rebalancing public perception on migration by countering mainstream media framing

To make our research accessible to non-academic audiences, we transformed it for wider sharing in online forums. Key findings (**R1**, **R3**, **R5**) were published in [The Independent](#) (typically reaching approximately 13.7 million unique visitors monthly, **S5:pp.2,7**). Also, findings and analyses later published as **R5**, first supported our engagement with UK parliament via [our panel discussion with MPs](#), and were then published as a [Foreign Policy Centre article](#) and used in our informal NGO meetings (**S6**) and our well-attended NGO training workshop series (**S7**).



Outputs (R2-5) from 'Refugee Journeys' were also disseminated as a photography exhibition shown publicly at Tate Liverpool, and in Milan, Orebro, Toronto and Wellington (Fig. 2). Over 3,500 visitors experienced the exhibition for a one-month total period between 2018-2020. Visitors' feedback (S8) shows our findings provided a counter-view to the framing of migration by mainstream media outlets:

*Since I haven't heard much about the crisis on the news any more recently, I assumed the situation has improved. This exhibition reminded me that it really hasn't and I learned a lot about how bad it really is... (S8:pp.1,18)*

*It has been very insightful and revealing of situations that most certainly here in the UK are not communicated through mainstream media. (S8:pp.1,14)*



Figure 2. Discussion of grassroots aid networks, at Tate Liverpool's exhibition of 'Refugee Journeys', November 2018

### C. Enabled NGOs operating in SEE to adapt to their context

Our research (R3) has supported the work of NGOs and their strategy development by allowing them to recognise the wider context within which they operate, so they could then make adjustments. **Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)** [Serbia](#) and [Greece](#) have used the research (R3) in their work:

*From 2016 to 2018, when I was still working in Belgrade...our regular discussions have informed and helped my work significantly as Humanitarian Affairs Officer, in better analysing the context and MSF operations. ...since 2019, after I moved to Athens as Regional Advocacy Representative, I have used your academic papers, in particular, "Urban geographies of refugee journeys" [R3]...to inform my colleagues especially on issues related to urban spaces and border regimes. (S9)*

The NGO **Mobile Info Team** (Greece) benefitted from our Brussels Roundtable to develop their border violence monitoring strategy:

*...two months after the conference we published our first annual report on the illegal pushbacks happening in the Evros region...the discussions held in Brussels inspired our outreach strategy and directed our subsequent actions to advocate against violations of human rights through the different mechanism explored during the Round Table. (S10)*

Similarly, the NGO, **Samos Volunteers** (Greece), used our [Foreign Policy Centre article](#) to make:

*...volunteers more aware of the broader situation beyond the island of Samos and the routes that refugees have taken... (S6:para.3)*

Our research has reached beneficiaries across the UK and Europe by employing top-down and bottom-up approaches that have impacted policy circles, NGOs and the public; in person and online. The significance of the impact is that it has exposed the violent displacement of migrants via the EU's border policies and its abandonment of human rights obligations towards people still stranded in SEE.

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

**S1: Event feedback forms completed by attendees of the Respecting Human Rights at the Border Roundtable (Brussels, 22 September 2019)**, co-organised by researchers from the border violence group (Obradovic-Wochnik, Isakjee, Davies and Augustova), European Council for Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) and the Quaker Council for European Affairs.

**S2: Policy note (Schengen: A club where fundamental rights (do not) matter? (2019) Policy Note #24) pp.1-4) by the European Council on Refugees and Exiles**, citing our research. [https://www.ecre.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/PN\\_24.pdf](https://www.ecre.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/PN_24.pdf)

**S3: Email (16 Jan 2020) from Head of International Advocacy, European Council on Refugees and Exiles**, explaining how the Aston co-organised roundtable event, and associated research informed ECRE's Policy Note #24 (S2).

**S4: Responding to irregular migration: a diplomatic route, House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee**, First Report of Session 2019 Report, with formal minutes relating to the report <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201919/cmselect/cmfa/107/107.pdf> together with: Obradovic-Wochnik, J., G. Bird, A. R. Beattie, T. Davies, A. Isakjee and P. Rozbicka 2019, **Evidence Submitted to the Parliamentary Select Committee on Irregular Migration** (ERM0015)

<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/foreign-affairs-committee/finding-a-diplomatic-route-european-responses-to-irregular-migration/written/104748.html>

**S5: Tally, and breakdown, of audience reach for five publications transformed for a lay readership and published online by four mainstream and non-mainstream media outlets**, reaching up to 14.1 million estimated readers a month – tallied from website analytics and databases (courtesy of ZPB Associates) based on online audience figures from media outlets. (NB. double counting unconsidered).

**S6: Letter from Samos Volunteers NGO**, showing how our research has impacted volunteer training activities by allowing volunteers to understand better the context they operate in.

**S7: Feedback forms from 26 attendees of our NGO training workshops (5-9 November 2019, Samos, Greece)**, highlighting (pp.3,5-6,8) how our research improved awareness and understanding of the political and legal contexts in which they operate.

**S8: Visitor feedback from Liverpool Tate attendees of the exhibition, Refugee Journeys**

**S9: Correspondence from Médecins Sans Frontières, Athens**, showing how the research was used to analyse MSF operations in the region, and inform staff about urban refugees.

**S10: Correspondence from Mobile Info Team NGO, Thessaloniki**, showing how our roundtable event was used to develop their strategy.