The ‘Refugee Crisis’ - an Anthropological Case Study of the Serbian Part of the Western Balkan Route

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Abstract of the Ph.D. Thesis

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The core task of this dissertation is to describe what actually happened on the fringes of the European Union (EU) during the "refugee crisis" in Europe in 2015 and 2016 and what kind of consequences it has had for migrants trying to reach the EU. This dissertation argues that the "refugee crisis" can be seen as a "historical event", in the sense of William H. Sewell Junior (1996) understanding, not only because around one million people from the so-called Global South, most often Muslims, entered the EU, but also because it has changed the border regime structure and the migrant movement in Southeastern Europe.

The exceptional period of the "refugee crisis" left quite a mark on the European border regime but also had long-lasting consequences on the internal EU politics. Some researchers suggest the "refugee crisis" fuelled greater Islamophobia in the EU. Furthermore, the migrants, from predominantly Muslim countries, became a figure in the political discourse that was used to mobilized right-wing electorate and opened the door of national and European parliaments to nationalist and xenophobic political groups such as Law and Justice in Poland, Alternative for Germany, or National Front in France. Following same line of thought, some argue that the crisis reinvigorated Euroscepticism and worsened the relations of the Balkan countries with the EU countries. Thus, the "refugee crisis" affected both the cooperation of the EU with the Southeastern European countries and internal EU relations.

In this dissertation, I look at the "refugee crisis" through liminal lenses (Turner1969; Thomassen 2009, 2015). I see it as a transitory period, which gave birth to a new border regime that was built on the ruins of the old one. The novelty of this border regime lays in the filtering process of migrants that take place in the "hotspots" at the EU external border, a kind of buffer zone where migrants were filtered. In addition, a new feature of the border regime in Southeastern Europe is the normalization of EU member states border guards' violence as a method of migration deterrence, which was not routinely practiced before 2015 in this region. These radical acts of violence towards unarmed children and adults have become regular and systematic at fringes of the EU. A further new quality of the European border regime is an entrapment of migrants in circular mobility stranded in a liminal space at the gates to the EU. In this ambiguous space of transit and space of containment migrants are "caught in mobility", neither able to go further nor back. Finally, the disturbing occurrences that took place at the turn of 2015 and 2016 gave rise to a strong and stable civil society dedicated to migration issues.

However, let us make it clear that these changes would most probably not have taken place without the "refugee crisis". This dissertation instead suggests that the seeds for the change of European border regime did exist before 2015, but the "refugee crisis" was a kind of a catalyst

in the process of reshaping the structure understood as medium and the outcome of the practices which constitute social system. I am highlighting the consequences of the "refugee crisis" here in order to stress the importance of this event. However, the scope of this work is more limited and modest, and I want to describe what actually happened during this liminal period: How come the European border regime collapsed? How and in what way was the new system of border control in Southeastern Europe implemented? How were the migration route(s) shaped, and by whom?

Place and methods of research

This work is based on the interdisciplinary literature and the ethnographic fieldwork in the temporary reception centres in Serbia at two border crossings: a North Macedonian-Serbian border and a Serbian-Hungarian border. From October 2015 to October 2016, I conducted participant observation, interviewed both migrants and local communities as well as members of civil society who provide help to migrants in Serbia. During this period, I engaged in the pro-migrant grassroot organizations. I started in Preševo, a predominantly Albanian town located on the border of Serbia with North Macedonia, where I volunteered in Border Free Association. The organization operated in an old tobacco factory, shut down during the dissolution of Yugoslavia, which was transformed into a temporary reception centre in the summer of 2015. Its purpose was to register and provide short term respite for those traveling through the Western Balkan countries. For the second location for my research, I chose Subotica and its surroundings on the Serbian-Hungarian border where from June 2015 until the last few weeks of 2016 I joined a grassroots group called Fresh Response. My work in both organizations consisted of distributing food and non-food items, providing information about the current situation along the Balkan corridor and psychological support. As such, my research turned into activist research, which presumes to acquisition of theoretical knowledge through action (Hale 2006; Goldstein 2014; Picozza 2017; Sandri 2017). This method also stemmed from my conviction that academic work might be based on activism since they both share the same set of values and can mutually enhance.

Beside the fieldwork conducted in these two locations, I also visited migrants in other government centres and unofficial settlements scattered around the country. Therefore, my research was combined with George Marcus' concept of multi-sited ethnography that allows one to follow migrants' histories in different parts of the globalized world and search for unexpected connections between places and contexts (1998: 90-94). Furthermore, between 2016 and 2018, I visited some of them, by which point they had either reached their (not a)

destination of choice or were still on the way. This helped me to understand their multidirectional journeys through Southeastern Europe and its changing conditions.

The structure of the dissertation

This dissertation consists of six chapters. It begins with a chapter titled *Defining Migrants in Liminal Space*. Here I elaborate on the conceptual framework and forward a critical analysis of term such as "refugees", "illegal migrants" or "asylum seekers". I show that these terms are highly ambiguous, bureaucratically invented categories that serve as a tool to categorise and discriminate people trying to reach the EU. Then, I conceptualize the space where the migrants, among whom I conducted my fieldwork, found themselves. I argue that in spite of a criticism of understanding migration in terms of liminality – as elaborated by Arnold van Gennep, Victor Turner and their followers – I show that this concept does not necessarily relate to migrants' uprootedness but rather to the suspension of laws and norms, the protractedness of the journey and uncertainty regarding future. Furthermore, the concept of liminality helps to emphasise new forms of actors' agency and in many situations subjugation to power.

In the second chapter: *The Collapse of the EU Border Regime: Shaping Migration Policy in the "Pre-Refugee Crisis" Phase*, I analyse the EU-ropean border regime and developments of migratory routes before 2015. To give a wider context of the migratory patterns and to avoid the trap of Balkan particularism, I compare the development of the migration trajectories through Serbia with other routes leading to the EU. I argue that the refugee crisis is a result of an attempt to stop migration through the Western and Central Mediterranean routes and combined with a lack of solidarity among the EU countries. Furthermore, following among other works of Marta Stojić Mitrovic (2014, 2015, 2016, 2019), I explain the adjustment of Serbian migration policy to the EU directives, which paved the way to externalize the border control to Serbia. I show that the externalization of border control, on the one hand, allows stopping unwanted migrants far away from the EU, and, on the other hand, secures free movement of goods and "genuine refugees" within the Schengen Zone. In this analysis I pay special attention to the promise of the enlargement of the EU to Southeastern Europe that works as inducement for the Balkan countries to subject their migration laws to EU requirements. I conclude this chapter with an argument that externalization of the border regime is a double-edged sword: protecting the EU borders against often imaginary threats at the cost of the values and norms supposedly essential of the EU.

In Chapter Three: *Liminality: Formalizing the Balkan Corridor*, I describe the liminal phase: the very moment of the collapse of the EU-ropean border regime and the formalization of the corridor used by around a million of migrants to enter the EU. I show the dramatic attempts to restore the previous order through implementation of contradictory, exceptional humanitarian and securitarian measures that often fail to fulfil their aims. I also provide in great ethnographic detail the impact of the de-bordering – the temporary opening of the external EU borders – on those who were at the forefront of migration wave, and the civil society reaction to de-bordering

In the fourth chapter: *Re-bordering: Introducing the Filtering Process*, I depict new methods undertaken by the EU to restore border control in Southeast Europe and their impact on migrant movement. I explain that re-bordering was introduced through the installation of "hotspots", an approach that imprecisely and arbitrarily filtered unwanted migrants from "genuine refugees" in the buffer zones at the entry point to the EU. Moreover, I demonstrate how the migrant filtering process led to, among other things, the creation of unofficial settlements along the Balkan route, high uncertainty among migrants, and clashes between migrants and law enforcers. The chapter concludes with an observation that that the re-bordering was accompanied by taking control over migrant modes of transportation, which consequently created tensions between private and state-owned transportation companies and the rehabilitation of old clandestine routes.

The fifth chapter: *Hope, Waiting and Mobility. The Migrant Movement in In-betweenness*, investigates the movement of migrants in the Serbian section of the Western Balkan route after the implementation of the EU-Turkish deal in March 2016 and, thus, sealing of the borders in Southeastern Europe. My argument is that the movement in this liminal space had not stopped. In spite of the great efforts towards militarizing the external EU borders, the push-backs and violence of the border guards and the structural and institutional *imposition of waiting*, migrants persisted in their attempts to move forward. I conclude with the reflection that migrants' movements on the doorstep to the EU might express their hopes to bring the *stuckedness in liminality* to an end.

In the last chapter: *Crafting Activists from Tourists. Volunteer Engagement in Refugee Protection in Serbia,* I suggest that apart from the new form of border management in Southeastern Europe, the long summer of migration gave birth to a grassroots movement dedicated to migrant protection. Here I scrutinize motivations of volunteers who travelled from the so-called Global North to Serbia, as well as modes of operation and the durability of their actions. I then describe the self-positioning and objectives of volunteers, and also explain

volunteers' roles and evolution of their activities. I argue that the modernization of the self and a need to respond to human tragedy are the key factors in the decision-making process as to whether one should engage voluntarily during the refugee crisis in Serbia. Thus, volunteering becomes a bridge between the individual and the collective and, as such, could be understood as a new form of civic engagement.

Discussion

In this work, I argue that the frenzied period of 2015 and 2016 was a liminal phase demarcated by de-bordering and suspension of the laws and norms regulating migrant movement, which created the formalized Balkan corridor. During this period, the EU tried to implement new elements of border control which, on the surface did not radically change the EU-ropean border regime. The EU, as it had been doing so before 2015, readily support stabilitocratic politicians in third countries and uses enlargement projects as a carrot dangling on a stick to convince these leaders to stop migrants on their soil. The EU is also ready to invest a substantial portion of EU taxpayer's money in high-tech surveillance systems to secure its external borders and filter those who are trying to cross it. But in spite of all these efforts, migrants keep arriving at a relatively steady number of around 100 000 per year. As I have shown, the EU-ropean fight against irregular migration risks migrants' lives by forcing them to take longer and more deadly routes.

Nevertheless, I suggest that when looking at the EU's external Southeastern, the refugee crisis brought significant changes in the European border regime structure and political scene. During this chaotic period, the borders of Southeastern Europe, demilitarized after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, have again become militarized again. Furthermore, the events of 2015 and 2016, on the one hand, let xenophobic and anti-migration rhetoric backed by paramilitary groups bloom, and, on the other hand, let solidarity and humanitarianism flourish. These two discordant voices somehow became louder after being silenced by the EU status quo regarding migration. Finally, the events of 2015 and 2016 bolstered right-wing political groups and allowed them to settle more prominently in national and European political landscapes. Throughout the refugee crisis, the EU tried to introduce new measures of border control that, although previously planned, would not have been possible to be implemented without the "state of exception". The externalization of the refugee camps, reinforcement of the filtering priority and relocation sought to regain control over European external borders. A crucial part of this project were the "hotspots". In the "hotspots" the unwanted migrants were separated from "genuine refugees" and then immobilized, while members of the latter category were to be transferred to the EU.

All these new elements of an old but "improved" EU border regime were backed by the normalization of tremendous violence used by border guards in Southeastern Europe, often supported by Frontex. However, after nearly four years it is clear that many of these components were unsuccessfully implemented. The Balkan route is not closed, neither is any other. Migrants are crowding on the Greek Islands, and Serbian, Bosnian and Herzegovinian or Croatian borders. They protest against the inhumane living conditions in the "hotspot" centres and the ineffective relocation programme. Although the scheme to relocate refugees from buffer zones failed and caused contention between EU countries leaders, these failures did not discourage the policymakers from proposing similar schemes or sticking to the obviously ineffectual direction of deterrence and containment of migrants as EU migration policy priorities (see: Mainwaring 2019)

My case study of migrants stranded in Serbia after the introduction of the filtering process shows that they will keep moving until they find a place where they can flourish. Migrants in Serbia found it nearly impossible to safety. Thus, they perceived Serbia as nothing more than a transit country, and thus were looking for stability and development somewhere else. Migrants' focus was on the future and further movement towards the EU. They perceived their *stuckedness in liminal space* as something temporal and exceptional, imposed on them by the border regime, which, like the whole journey, would come to an end soon. This observation confirms the argument made by Thomassen that those who are in a liminal state believe that there is "a way out it" (2009: 21), but researchers have shown that reaching the EU does not end precariousness, exclusion or movement. Once a migrant enters the grey zone of illegality, they might never find a "way out of it". As many researchers have shown, upon reaching the EU migrants were often disenchanted with the reception. The strict asylum procedure, short validity of documents (Fontanari 2019), Dublin regulations (Picozza 2017) or simply differences in reception conditions (Brekke and Brochmann 2013) did bar them from finding new home, but rather forced them to move. Therefore, movement can be a blessing and a curse for migrants depending on the state of their journey and the expectations they hold.

The movement gave migrants hope to escape a liminality and eventually reach an idealized Europe, a kind of mythical place, which takes its time to arrive. However, there were also people who stopped hoping and looking towards futures in which they could see themselves as active subjects (Fontanari 2019: 196). The psychological strain of liminality causes disorientation and undermines self-confidence and motivation, which makes it hard to meet with a happy end of the journey.

I describe in this work the closure of the Balkan corridor, the increase of violence, and the structural and institutional *imposition of waiting* that consist on the state controlled waiting lists for interviews at the transit zones, which aimed to divide migrants and their regulate their flow according to their "vulnerability". I show that the structural constrains of the post-EU-Turkish deal increases the movement of single, male migrants, considered as economic migrants and thus not worth protection and unwanted. Such movement reflects the migrants' hope and agency and offers a chance of social mobility. In other words, as long as migrants' needs, hopes, and aspirations remain unsatisfied and insatiate and as long as there is another place to go, they will keep moving. The hyper mobility on the fringes of the EU brings to mind walking on the spot or walking around in circles (Jansen 2015). These processes become metaphors for blocked expectations on the road to Europe (Narotzky and Besnier 2014: 11).

The high level of geographical movement discloses a border control paradox: the more states impose movement-adverse conditions, the more migrants feel they have no choice but to continue moving. Hence, this work confirms Hess' argument that the EU-ropean border regime does not stop movement; rather it keeps people "caught in mobility" and transforms border-regions into zones of heightened circulation (2012: 436). Furthermore, and importantly, it illustrates that many attempts to "protect" the EU's external borders not only unnecessarily risk human lives but also do not stop easily migrant movement. In this sense, they are unproductive; if anything, they seem to create hyper mobile classes that circulate in precarious zones. In fact, the state-imposed legal and physical constraints to curb international migration only temporarily limit the usage of one migratory route in favour of another, more dangerous one, such as the one taking its toll across the Mediterranean Sea.

Finally, the growing body of literature on migrants reception in EU shows that even after often deadly-dangerous and years-long journeys, migrants do not find safety, prosperity or a settled life within EU borders. The movement on the outside of these borders is filled with hope, which often eventually turns to disillusion. As such, this thesis confirms that movement gives often more satisfaction and hope than reaching actually the destination does (Hage 2009b; Procupez 2015; Fontanari 2019). Therefore, my ethnography illustrates that, paradoxically, the attempts to halt migration has an opposite effect: the EU migration approach is responsible for an increase of cross-border movement, despair, vulnerability and human misery. Furthermore, it suggests that the EU-ropean border control regime not just expensive, but ineffective too, given the fact that all my research partners eventually reached the EU.

The EU border regime produces a constantly growing number of lumpenproletariat who are stuck in liminality. They live in uncertainty, in the *zones of abandonment*, where they become "visible realities that exist through and beyond formal governance and that determine the life course of an increasing number of poor people who are not part of mapped populations" (Biehl 2005: 4). Thousands of migrants and those whose asylum applications were rejected circulate outside or inside of Europe, in life-threatening conditions hoping to reach their destination. They are left without a work permit, access to health care, education or any prospect of settling down. Such politics can backfire on the EU since these abandoned people deprived of opportunities are an easy target for gangs or extremist groups.

So, is the crisis over? If we agree on the understanding of the refugee crisis as a crisis of border control, then it is certainly not. The holes in border control are only partly sealed. The EU, in spite of high political and financial costs, allows defence companies to enclose the bloc a the vicious circle of securitisation and militarisation of border control. Recently, on 30 January 2020, Greece announced a pilot plan to install a "floating wall" in the Aegean Sea to deter migrants from reaching the Greek islands (Smith 2020). Yet, in the walls of "fortress Europe" new cracks will show up every day because people in their thousands find themselves on the EU margins desperate to escape liminality. On the Greek island of Lesbos 20,000 people alone are waiting, accommodated in camps with a holding capacity of less than 3,000. In the entire country, which has become a buffer-zone of the EU, there are 112,000 migrants (UNHCR 2019b). In Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia there are 104,243 migrants on their way to their desired destinations (UNCR 2019c). The number of migrants camping on the fringes of the EU will grow and attempts to stop them are doomed to fail, not only because of wars and global inequalities, but also because of the demographic boom in Africa and climate change causing floods and droughts. Paradoxically, governments and their citizens that today push migrants back may soon be forced to seek asylum themselves, since wildfires and floods do not recognize national borders.

My work shows that various actors who went unheard until 2015 started to compete with each other. The voices clamouring about an invasion of culturally incompatible Muslim men became present in public and political discourses and consequently drove the rise of islamophobia. Their voices were accompanied by paramilitary groups that engaged in border control. On the other hand, the refugee crisis energized new forms of civil society groups who raised awareness of migration, global injustice and the cruelty of the EU border regime. Many of them were an ephemeral response sparked by the media's dramatic coverage that found the "spectator's

dilemma" (Boltanski 1999: xiv) in the Western world. Consequently, many, mostly young people, went to support migrants on their journey to EU-rope. However, as soon as the media lost interest in the migration issue, the number of volunteers decreased and many NGOs became defunct. Thus volunteers' "tourism" along the Western Balkan route – as a reaction to media reports – raises the question of who is the main beneficiary of their work in the field: the migrants or volunteers, pursuing the sense of their own life in a post-industrial "risk society". According to Didier Fassin (2012), the logic of humanitarianism implies that helpers receive pleasure from helping, which is not a fault, but rather questions their altruism. The real danger, however, is on the structural level. The volunteers are in dialectical relationship with the state and have been used in their international politics with neighbouring countries. They often replace the government in providing migrants with protection and help, although it is the state who is designated to do so. As David Mosse observes, "… policy models do not guarantee practices, they are sustained by them" (Mosse 2005: 182, as cited in Minn 2007); civil society's participation in the refugee crisis might therefore constitute a precedent for future cases where the state will not be able to guarantee assistance to people in need and its duties will be performed by less organised groups of individually motivated volunteers.