Old Routes, New Perspectives

A Postcolonial Reading of the Balkan Route

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Abstract: This article delivers a reading of the deconstruction and restoration of the European border regime along the post-Yugoslav section of the Balkan route from the perspective of assemblages of mobility. It starts with a short history of the opening and closure of the formalized corridor in 2015/2016 by claiming that the restored border regime adopted most of the main characteristic of its pre-crisis period, while simultaneously aggravating their securitarian dimensions. It continues with the recent history of the Balkan route from the perspective of assemblages of mobility: the mutual articulations of migrant struggles and local struggles against the imposition of homogenizing forms characteristic of colonial modernity. State centered analysis is additionally challenged and rejected while discussing the role of sovereign violence in the restoration of the European border regime. Article finally explores the potential of mobility struggles for postcolonial critique by describing the uncertain articulations of the European border regime in Bosnia and Herzegovina specifically.

Keywords: Balkan route, assemblages of mobility, autonomy of migration, European border regime, post-colonial critique

The attempt of this article is to deliver a reading of the recent history of the temporal suspension of the European border and migration regime on the Balkan route during and immediately after the Long Summer of Migration in 2015 and its subsequent restoration from 2016 onwards. We start our observation from the vantage point of *assemblages of mobility*, which are composed of practices of migrants and refugees as well as various local agencies. Those assemblages, or joint agencies, are the result of the mutual implication of various forms of escape, of what Papodopulus et al. call fixed spaces of the subjects of sovereignty (Papadopoulos/Stephenson/Tsianos 2008). Through this mutuality, migration movements simultaneously reveal the hidden and previously undisclosed subalternized local forms of escape and therefore invigorate the dormant critique of coloniality in the geopolitical locations that nowadays function as the borders of Europe. Our extensive militant research and ethnography of the Balkan route spans from Croatia and Slovenia to Serbia and Bosnia and Herze-

govina.[1] By following migrant agency and the nexuses it constitutes with various solidarity initiatives along the route, our investigation gradually pointed to something much less tangible: to counter-hegemonic memories inscribed in localities of post-Yugoslav territory that significantly contribute to the local articulations of the European migration and border regime. Such exciting deviation in our findings was crucial in surpassing the logic of reductionism that is enforced and encouraged by more or less spectacular applications of state violence in closing the corridor and establishing firm control over national borders along the route. Instead of being dazzled by the presumable return of sovereign state violence, we could deepen our insights into the complexity on and around the route to invoke the heterogeneous tacit and silenced agencies and the new possibilities of connectivity among them. In order to surpass the tiresome and unproductive false alternative between the ›European‹ and ›sovereign state‹ approach to the reconstruction of the European border regime, we dived with great delight into a much bigger complexity beyond oppositional dialectics: into new counter-hegemonic stories of the Balkan route. This journey begins with a brief description of the establishment of the formalized corridor and its gradual closure during the summer of 2015 and spring 2016. It continues with an analysis of the corridor in the context of the European integration processes of affected states and the constituent elements of the emerging European border regime. It proceeds to re-examine the same developments from the perspective of autonomy of migration and assemblages of mobility and concludes with a description of the currently most critical point of aggregation and resistance, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FORMALIZED CORRIDOR: FROM DECONSTRUCTION OF THE BORDER REGIME TO ITS RESTORATION

The unprecedented increase in quantity and visibility of illegalized transit migration through the Balkans towards North and West Europe in Summer 2015, which soon

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1 | This article draws upon our involvement in solidarity activism during the opening and closure of the formalized refugee corridor in 2015 and 2016 in the framework of Antiracist Front Without Borders (Pistotnik/Čebron/Kozinc 2016). It is also based on recent involvements in the activist project Info Kolpa that attempts to monitor police procedures at the Slovenian southern border and the Schengen border as well as on ethnographic research conducted in the post-Yugoslav region as part of various research projects, including a three-month research residence in Sarajevo during the spring of 2019.

became labeled as the »refugee crisis«, led to the establishment of the so called »formalized corridor« (Beznec/Speer/Stojić Mitrović 2016). In less than six months of its existence, the corridor eventually enabled continuous and state-sponsored transit with a corresponding humanitarian infrastructure of almost one million people. It began on the Macedonian-Greek border and initially continued to Serbia and later to Hungary. After the completion of the fence on the Hungarian-Serbian border the corridor turned to Croatia and Slovenia via Austria to Germany. The formalized corridor, or the temporary legalization of transit migration through the long time existing so called Balkan route, was a historical unicum, a legal and political precedent: people who were previously labeled ›illegal migrants‹ practiced and gained the right to enter, transit, and leave one state after the other towards the preferred country of destination.

The formalized corridor was the shifting and ever changing interplay of the agency and autonomy of (mass) migration, the engagement of solidarity structures and broader civil society, as well as various humanitarian and securitarian practices of the affected states. It was comprised of temporary and ad hoc coalitions, conflicts, tactics, and strategies, but always depending on the existence of a receiving state and therefore the possibility of further transit. It was a sort of state-organized smuggling, involving a great amount of legal, political, and ›logistical creativity‹ (Speer 2017), that enabled a safer, faster, and cheaper travel. But on the other hand, its main purpose was not to build a permanent and safe humanitarian infrastructure to challenge or resolve the ›refugee crisis‹, but to transfer the ›human packages‹ from one border, from one state to the other as fast as possible. The main philosophy behind the corridor was not ›well-come‹, but ›welcome-through‹ (Bužinkić 2017). Additionally, the formalization of movement was not only instrumental in increasing the efficiency of transferring responsibility to the respective northern neighbor. It was also the only way to tame the movement and gradually stop it without the use of continuous and undifferentiated extreme violence. In other words, gradual formalization, or opening from South to North, finally enabled the gradual closure from North to South precisely through the chain reaction of the affected states.

The formalized corridor should not be understood as a homogeneous material and political infrastructure but as a flexible phenomenon that featured different modalities in different time periods and in different nation states. We separate the period of deconstruction, which spans from summer 2015 to spring 2016, in two different phases (see also Beznec/Speer/Stojić Mitrović 2016; Speer 2017; Lunaček Brumen/Meh 2016).

The first phase, which we call the ›emergency‹ phase, begins in June 2015 with the formalization of the southern part of the Balkan route, i.e. with the legalization of transit migration through Macedonia with the introduction of the so called 72-

hours paper.[2] After the March of Hope with around 2000 involved refugees moving from Budapest Keleti train station towards the Austrian border on 4th of September 2015, Germany announced that it will not close its borders for the new arrivals from Syria (Kasparek/Speer 2015). From the next day onward, people were transferred from Hungary to Austria with various means of transport from where the vast majority would continue their travel to Germany and further north with special or regular trains. With the March of Hope and the state-facilitated transit from Hungary to Northern Europe the northern part of the route was formalized. After the completion of the Hungarian fence with Serbia on 14th of September 2015 the corridor moved to Croatia, and, after the completion of the Hungarian fence on the Croatian border on 16th of October 2015, the corridor moved to Slovenian borders and reception centers where people were transferred with trains and buses to the northern border with Austria (Speer 2017). The initial attempts from the Slovenian and Croatian authorities to control the amount or speed of the movement, or permanently close the border, turned out to be—just as in the case of the March of Hope—futile. The final trajectory of the formalized corridor was established, forced into existence by the agency and autonomy of migration.

The second phase, which we call the phase of ›gradual closure‹, begins on the 18th of November 2015 when Slovenia decided to close the border for all people that were not citizens of Syria, Iraq, or Afghanistan.[3] This was the beginning of national profiling and separating supposed economic migrants from the supposed refugees on the basis of nationality. It enabled the ›nationalization of the refugee policy‹ and the formation of a parallel ›counter-corridor‹ of deportations from North to South. The corridor turned into an instrument of physical containment, of ›mobile detention‹, and a machinery of segregation, hierarchization, and fragmentation of movement under the umbrella of the established asylum regime and humanitarianism (Hameršak/Pleše 2017).

The Slovenian and later also Austrian partial closure of the border produced a (most probably intentional) domino effect to the South. On the 28th of November 2015 Macedonia started building a fence on its southern border to Greece, which led

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2 | Macedonia's parliament passed an amendment to the *Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection*, which introduced a travel permit that allowed asylum seekers to apply for asylum at any police station at border crossings or inside the country within the time limit of 72 hours. This paper basically legalized transit migration through Macedonia after the Serbian example where such temporary legalization of transit existed since 2008 (see UNHCR Macedonia 2015).

3 | On the 20th of February 2016, Austria decided to also exclude Afghan citizens from the corridor.

to a dramatic enlargement of the Idomeni makeshift camp. The numbers of stranded people in the camp grew everyday due to new arrivals from southern Greece and so did the tension among those that were eventually allowed to pass to Macedonia and further north based on their nationality and those who were forced to stay behind the fence (Anastasiadou et al. 2017). On 8th of March 2016, Slovenia and consequently Macedonia officially closed the border fully and permanently. The establishment of a border to border corridor with closed camps as well as the fragmentation and weakening of the movement through the production of different statuses was efficient. It was instrumental for inhibiting the autonomy of migration that finally enabled the reversal of movement and the gradual restoration of the border regime.

Different levels of inclusion of the affected states within the hierarchic EUropean integration project and the migration control regime certainly significantly defined the manner in which the corridor was formalized and subsequently closed. They were instrumental in bringing migrant movement through the Balkans under control, in taming its unruliness, and in imposing differentiations and segmentations that are characteristic for the European border regime. The post-Yugoslav region, that was once a unified and rather homogeneous political space, is nowadays a vast palette of little states with different accesses to the EU space of free circulation. The EU member Croatia as well as the EU and Schengen member Slovenia attempted to impose full state control over the corridor. The prime concern of the Slovenian government during the existence of the corridor was to achieve the closure of borders as soon as possible, while Croatian government focused on the fast and efficient transport of migrants and refugees initially to the Hungarian and later to the Slovenian border. At that time, Croatia even produced a domino effect in the northern direction by not obstructing columns of refugees to enter Slovenia through the green border. On the other hand, in the EU candidate country Serbia such state control was never achieved. Even a certain laxity could be perceived in the attitude of Serbian authorities towards the existence of migrant itineraries outside the official route with camps.

Since March 2016, the European border regime in South-East Europe started to fully reconstruct (Hess/Kasparek 2017) and some of its characteristics are even stricter than before the establishment of the corridor. Along the Balkan route, we witness an increase in, and normalization of, the fortification of borders with fences (Slovenian-Croatian, Hungarian-Croatian, Hungarian-Serbian, Macedonian-Greek, and Bulgarian-Turkish border), intensified and often violent policing of border regions as well as frequent use of illegal push-backs (Slovenia, Croatia, and Hungary). These material enclosures dramatically affect the geography of migratory routes and increase the human and financial costs of border crossing (Amnesty International 2019; see also the contribution by Robert Rydzewski in this issue). They are en-

forced and fortified by legal and political enclosures in terms of new laws on foreigners which drastically restrict the right to claim asylum as well as further criminalize any kind of solidarity with ›illegal‹ migrants.

Despite the evident and drastic fall of migration to Greece and along the Balkan route after spring 2016, the topic of ›borders‹ and ›migration policy‹ of the EU and its individual member states remain one of the central and most controversial topics of disputes in which the European and wider public are faced with two opposing interpretations of the post-crisis era. One narrative, mostly propagated by the European Commission (European Commission 2017), emphasizes the »fully integrated EU migration policy« and the supposedly effective reconstruction of the European border regime, epitomized by falling numbers of asylum seekers, reactivation of the Dublin system, and the tentative functioning of the refugee relocation mechanism among member states. The other narrative, mostly propagated by growing right wing populist movements and some right wing populist regimes, utilizes the phenomena of the refugee crisis and the aftermath of the formalized corridor as an example of the supposedly still widely open European borders and the supposedly ongoing welcoming migration policy of the so called core European countries, most notably Germany.

We claim that the new border regime in South-East Europe maintains most of the main characteristic of its pre-crisis period such as: a) externalization of European migration control to non-›European‹ states such as Turkey b) containment of the migration ›crisis‹ on the south of the EU (due to sheer ›geographical exposure‹, due to increased difficulty to travel further north and the subsequent formation of bottleneck countries, due to the continued efforts to reinstate the Dublin III system of deportations to first countries of entry etc.) and c) the ongoing use of the peculiar mixture of securitarian and humanitarian practices of affected states. Simultaneously, there are some new characteristics that will be the focus of our next chapters: alongside the rise of new legal and political frameworks, a securitarian infrastructure, and consequent shifting routes of migratory movements in all affected states, we witness a new form of ›intra-European‹ externalization of EU migration control to the non-EU and/or non-Schengen countries along the Balkan route, most notably Croatia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) (Ahmetašević/Mlinarević 2019), but also Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro. In order to become full members of the Schengen and/or the EU space, some states increasingly function as the main protectors of the external EU border (Croatia, Bulgaria) or as certain bottle necks (Serbia, BiH), where several thousand stranded refugees find little hope to receive shelter and protection or to autonomously move towards the north. In addition, this externalization transformed the previously established notions of ›transit‹ and ›receiving‹ countries in the Balkans. While they remain mostly transit states, they still host more refugees and asylum

seekers than before 2015. The former ›transit refugees‹ are now ›caught-in-mobility‹ (Hess 2011), transformed into ›illegals‹, ›refugees‹, ›asylum seekers‹, or ›economic migrants in the process of deportation‹ and are scattered across the Balkans in different types of institutions or spaces and shifting between legal statuses (see also Robert Rydzewski's contribution to this issue of Movements).

MIGRANT ROUTE, ASSEMBLAGE OF MOBILITY AND POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUE

In our attempt to read the recent history of the Balkan route since 2015 from the perspective of mobility struggles and local anti-hegemonic discourses that together form assemblages of mobility, we refer to developments of critical migration and border studies whose aim is to de-naturalize and de-objectify migration so that migrant practices and subjectivities are considered as constitutive for border and migration regimes. What was retrospectively labeled as a Copernican turn in migration and border studies (Casas-Cortes/Cobarrubias/Pikles 2015) evolved in theories on the autonomy of migration (ibid.) and in research projects such as Transit Migration 1 (2002-2004) and 2 (2016) that introduced an »ethnographic regime approach« as an »ethnographic border regime analysis«, or as an »critical regime analysis« (Hess 2012, 2016; Hess/Kasparek 2017). Such approaches, that have developed by applying »insight of de-constructivist social science theories« (Hess 2012), introduce what we —while referring to the philosophical and political theoretical background of de-constructivism— call immanence of power in migration and border studies. This has various far-reaching consequences. The one that we are especially interested in introduces a heterogeneity of actors or agencies to the research. When border and migration policies are not understood as being an implementation of a sovereign power or a state-centered and centralized rationality of power, we get a strategic field that is animated and shaped by state and non-state actors on a national and transnational level, where the rationality of power is defined upon relations of forces, through constant negotiations (ibid.). In the absence of a monopoly on force and rationality, the basic constituent of modern sovereignty, a new sovereignty, sometimes also referred to as »transnational sovereignty« (Papadopoulus/Stephenson/Tsianos 2008), emerges through ad hoc practices of governance dealing with emergency situations. For this reason, the site where control over mobility is applied ceases to predominantly be the physical border of nation states. It rather becomes a more fluid landscape where people carve new itineraries of mobility. Notions of *ubiquity of borders*, *regime* and *externalization* of border control are used to depict such new sites of power articula-

tions (see, for example, Balibar 2004; Hess 2012, 2016; Hess/Kasparek, 2017; Casas-Cortes/Cobarrubias/Pikles 2015; Papadopoulus/Stephenson/Tsianos 2008). But the matter of heterogeneous actors and agencies does not solely refer to a variety in a quantitative sense but rather points to the existence of a qualitative difference between them. Not only is a strategic field of immanent power hierarchical with various actors having more or less power, they are also unequal in the sense of incommensurability. What is therefore highlighted is not only the importance of migrant agency in the articulation of border and migration regimes, but also alterity of migrant subjectivity. Therefore, while referring to Foucault's notion of ascending analysis (Foucault 2003)—meaning a bottom up analysis of power articulations that takes into account peripheral and marginal sites where power generates as well as related general schemes of domination while simultaneously revealing the possibility of other power—we claim that bottom-up analyses of making and remaking a migration regime could reveal not only the way hegemony articulates itself but also the ways possible counter-hegemony could be articulated by means of other narratives of migrant routes enunciated in assemblages of mobility.

Against the background of such theorizations of border and migration regimes, we attempt to introduce postcolonial or rather decolonial critique (Bachir Diagne/Amselle 2018) to our analysis of the ways the European border regime is being restored along the Balkan route on the territory of former Yugoslavia. While such critique is mainly foreclosed in the studies of this area (Bjelić 2018), we claim that research on migrant routes crossing post-Yugoslav states demands its introduction. There are various reasons for this. The efforts of state authorities to regain control over human mobility after 2015 relied heavily on racializing practices and the mobilization of racist sentiments in the public sphere. Such »authentic« expressions of racism certainly appoint to »endogenous« expressions and sources of racism and, therefore, to a historical presence and perpetuation of colonial power relations in the Balkan region. Furthermore, the turbulent political history and nowadays chronic instability of the area, that has been tailored upon the model of the modern European nation state since the demise of socialist and federal Yugoslavia, could be considered as a proof that the absolute sovereignty of the nation state, which evolved in close relation to colonial and imperialist expansion, is not universalizable (Balibar 2004). A critique of this imposition of the European nation form is present in local counter-hegemonic articulations of political constitutionalization based upon diversity and heterogeneity. In its intersection with the »constituent power of the escaping people that evacuate the fixed spaces of sovereignty« (Papadopoulus/Stephenson/Tsianos 2008) such critique and articulations form a sort of *joint agency* that generates *postcolonial critique*.

In order to portray the epistemological potential of such interrelatedness between joint agency and post-colonial critique, we refer to De Castro's criticism of the obsession with grand divisors as *fons et origo* of colonialism (De Castro 2009: 9) and his affirmation of *relational ontology*, which is a practice of comparison and translation as mutual implication and transformation (ibid.: 54). One could claim that counter-hegemonic discourses that reject homogeneity common to normative conceptions of being and constitutionalized state power regard diversity, heterogeneity and migrant practices as precisely those who escape fixed spaces of sovereignty. The subjectivity of mobility is therefore a *becoming* that dissolves identity and inevitably composes hybrid assemblages of mobility with other subjectivities escaping such spaces. Human mobility as a form of escape is, therefore, a decolonizing act, generating assemblages as hybrid spaces of enunciation (Mignolo 2012) that articulate a post-colonial critique. We use these rather abstract notions of authors such as De Castro and Mignolo to expand the scope of postcolonial critique beyond the analysis of mere unequal relations between dominant and subjugated powers. One can surely identify a colonial relation in the subordinate position of local (Balkan) powers in charge of restoring the EUropean border regime on behalf of EU core states and powers. And our analysis of the postcolonial condition partly resides on that. But we also strive to transcend this understanding of the ›non-European‹ and ›non-modern‹ Other as the inverse projection of the ›European‹ and ›modern‹ Self. Instead we seek to identify an affirmative aspect of the ›European‹ Other, or rather an Alterity that enables alternative conceptualizations of *being in common*, which historically developed to counter the violent imposition of homogenizing forms characteristic of colonial modernity.

Militant research that draws upon the rich history of collaborative knowledge production developed within social movements offers a particularly appropriate methodology that allows articulating such hybrid spaces of enunciation. By refusing a detached and universal position of enunciation—a position which so often obscures relations of (colonial) power and domination—militant research instead opens up situated ways of narrating the migrant route. By this, it avoids sovereignist and securitarian discourse, on the one hand, and universalist discourse of (human) rights, on the other. We do not claim that mobility struggles should not be struggles for rights, and we certainly recognize the emancipatory potential of rights claiming as well as the necessity of struggles on the legal terrain. As Spinoza has taught us, rights can be regarded as an expression of the power of the multitude and should not be understood exclusively as the expression of a transcendent power. Here we are referring to the *discourse* of rights that tends to be the discourse of power's origin and legitimacy, eclipsing the relationality and internal antagonisms that permeate political categories and therefore prevents to grasp the political subjectivity of migration.

THE HISTORY OF THE BALKAN ROUTE SEEN
FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ASSEMBLAGES OF MOBILITY

Now it is time to analyze the history of the unprecedented opening of Europe and the subsequent restoration of the European border and migration regime in the Balkans from the perspective of *assemblages of mobility*. A history that could be understood as a history of non-sovereign localities along the Balkan route forming *ecologies of mobile existence* (Casas-Cortes/Cobarrubias/Pickles 2015) together with escaping subjectivity of migrants.

Such a locality, to begin with the south of the route, is the area around the city of Preševo with the village Miratovac on the Serbian-Macedonian border. Researching on solidarity structures on the Balkan route we have encountered quite ›unusual suspects‹ in this borderland. Different actors, from the local Imam to Albanian youth organizers, got involved in various solidarity actions with migrants and refugees: they built a new cross-border road through the fields, they monitored economic exchanges between the local population and people on the move by defining fair prices of various goods and services and intervened in case the local providers exploited those on the receiving end. Such practices of economic and social inclusion of migrants in transit reveal a specific understanding of economy and authority: solidarity and fairness should be inherent to socio-economic relations, so the state is not needed as an intervening force to address the negative effects of economy that is supposedly driven by possessive individualism. Furthermore, such practices exclude the existence of an absolute and unique authority since they rely on constant negotiation among various sources of authority that gain legitimacy while being exercised. In short, this is *autonomy*. While this case of socio-economic inclusion of migrants in transit at the Serbian-Macedonian border refers to Albanian autonomy,[4] such a paradigm of autonomy has a historical situatedness in the Balkan area. It continuously subverted and subverts violent attempts to rearrange the Balkan heterogeneity and turn it into sovereign nation states; attempts that, since the introduction of the national paradigm in the region in the 19th century, repeatedly led to wars including ethnic cleansing and genocide. Such *autonomy* on the southern Serbian border, easily related to the migrant *non-sovereign subjectivity*, and formed an *assemblage of mobility* that metaphorically turned the border into a bridge or literally turned the

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4 | Ibrahim Rugova and his associates articulated this as a political project during the Serbian apartheid regime in Kosovo. It was defeated as such in the 1990s due to policies of ethnic cleansing by the Milošević regime and the Western military intervention that supported political forces that demanded the establishment of an independent nation state.

field into a road. Furthermore, such an assemblage of mobility certainly prevented the formalization of the route into a form of state-controlled humanitarian corridor which was the precondition to close the route and borders.[5] We certainly do not deny a certain ambiguity in such non-sovereign social practices that at some other localities could lead to the savage exploitation of migrants and refugees. We rather claim that they have to be considered in order to understand the dynamic of the route and to articulate its counter-hegemonic narration.

During our discussions with local Albanian activists in Preševo and Miratovac about their motives to get involved in solidarity activities with people on the move, they frequently mentioned their previous experience of being refugees themselves. Beyond the particular locality of the Macedonian-Serbian border, personal refugee experiences certainly promoted formations of assemblages of mobility between migrant subjectivities and those of local residents with a shared history of refugeeism. Modern day ›local‹ refugees along the post-Yugoslav section of the Balkan route are the product of several wars that accompanied the dissolution of Federal Socialist Yugoslavia and the following establishment of several new nation statelets in the 1990's. While those processes were relatively peaceful in areas that were ethnically homogeneous, they were marked by extreme violence, ethnic cleansing, and genocide in ethnically heterogeneous areas. One of the regions most affected by nationalist violence was East Slavonia, the border region between Croatia and Serbia, through which the migrant route turned after Hungary sealed its border with Serbia. According to accounts from that area (Lunaček Brumen/Meh 2016) and our personal experience, at the very beginning of mass transit through Slavonia in fall 2015—when the Croatian state was still almost absent from humanitarian or policing activities—local people and international volunteers formed ad hoc solidarity initiatives to provide various kinds of help to the people crossing the border. Although Croatian authorities eventually managed to take control over the route and squeeze out all independent and autonomous actors, they never fortified and militarized the border with Serbia. Having in mind that various solidarity initiatives in Croatia like *Welcome! Initiative* and *Are you Syrious?* adopted the strategy of mainstreaming solidarity, also by keeping up a positive discourse on people on the move by constantly reminding the Croatian public of its own history of refugeeism, it is possible to claim that the initial peculiarly neutral attitude of the Croatian authorities was motivated by the legacy of recent nationalist wars against areas with heterogeneous ethnic composition in Croatia. Those

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5 | When the Serbian state tried to enforce state monopoly over migrant transport from Preševo to Belgrade, local activists organized a protest scandalizing family connections between the owner of the designated transport company and a high official in the Serbian government.

areas that are part of the historic Balkan route are still coping with the traumatic experience of war and refugeesim on both sides of the ethno-national divide. In such a situation, the mutual translation of various refugee experiences and shared *distance to*, or even *refusal of*, fixed spaces of subjects of (ethno-national) sovereignty certainly promoted the *ecology of mobile existence* that could foster Croatian authorities to facilitate the freedom of movement of refugees and migrants by focusing on their fast transport towards Slovenia.

Slovenian authorities initially tried to prevent the massive entering of refugees coming from Croatia by deploying riot police at their main point of entrance, the Obrežje border crossing (Lunaček Brumen/Meh 2016). But similarly to Croatia, also in Slovenia the initial transit period was marked by an incredible mobilization of solidarity by members of civil society. By the time the first refugees arrived at the Slovenian border, hundreds of locals already volunteered for months along the entire route from the Greek islands to the Austrian border by collecting humanitarian aid, providing direct and immediate assistance to the people traveling north, and/or joining several antiracist manifestations for open borders in Slovenia, even denouncing or subverting government attempts to establish state control over freedom of movement (Pistotnik/Lipovec Čebron/Kozinc 2016). Moreover, joint efforts of refugees and local anti-racist networks managed to politically open the gate to the Schengen space by blocking the traffic through the border crossing Obrežje and, with it, the entire main highway that connects Central and South-East Europe for several hours. This action happened after Slovenian border police suddenly ceased to allow small groups of refugees to cross the border and more and more people were stranded at the border crossing. As a result, Slovenian authorities were forced to remove the line of riot police and provide busses for refugees to travel further north, and thereby the humanitarian refugee corridor through Slovenia was firmly established (Kurnik 2015). Contemporary antiracist activism in Slovenia has its distinctive local genealogy, including personal and organizational continuity with the struggle of Bosnian refugees, migrant workers (coming mainly from countries of former Yugoslavia, most notably BiH), asylum seekers, and the struggle of the Erased (victims of the Slovenian ›bureaucratic‹ version of ethnic cleansing as part of the nationalist war on multiethnic Yugoslav societies). Therefore, the common action on the border crossing Obrežje (and many others that later followed inside of the state) represents a mutual articulation of struggles for freedom of movement and ›local‹ struggles against the imposition of the ›nation form‹ (Balibar 2004) that has led to wars and ethnic cleansing in heterogeneous localities of former Yugoslavia. Such an assemblage of mobility was active on the Slovenian section of the Balkan route in the time of the humanitarian corridor

and its subsequent closure, and it continues nowadays while the Balkan route is again illegalized and criminalized.

SOVEREIGN VIOLENCE ON THE ROUTE

A lot of attention, certainly rightful and necessary, has recently been given to *sovereign violence* on the route after the closure of the official corridor. And there is an abundance of it. The closure of the corridor in spring 2016 on the (Slovenian-Croatian) Schengen border was established with unprecedented militarization. Since the closure of the corridor, the Slovenian police systematically denies the refugees on its territory to apply for asylum by handing them over to the Croatian police on the basis of a readmission agreement and joint Slovenian-Croatian border police patrols (Info Kolpa 2019).[6] The Croatian police on the other hand regularly violently pushes migrants who are crossing from Bosnia and Serbia or are returned by Slovenia back to Bosnia by literally beating people across the border (see Proglio/Zochi 2017; Welcome n.d.).[7] Although push-backs are secretive, they are now already quite publicly known, not in order to raise concern but to demonstrate that the state exercises its sovereignty.

All this certainly appoints to sovereign violence. But we should neither be deceived and tempted to claim that nation states have reclaimed sovereignty over borders nor that the *regime of mobility control* is in retreat.[8] If we stick to the double definition of the *regime of mobility control*, which includes migrant agency as constitutive to regime of mobility control on the one hand and the variety of state and non state ac-

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6 | When an activist group from Ljubljana in collaboration with a legal NGO began to monitor police procedures on the border, the authorities responded by launching a media campaign against the latter accusing it of being involved in trafficking and forcing it to abandon the project of police monitoring.

7 | The attempts to publicly and legally denounce such practices were met with a criminalization of solidarity as the case of little Medina, a little Afghan girl that was killed during a push back from Croatia to Serbia, clearly illustrates. When one activist later helped her family to apply for asylum in Croatia so that justice could be sought by simply monitoring police procedure on the border, he was criminally charged and sentenced as trafficker.

8 | According to statistics more than 24.000 refugees and migrants registered in Bosnia and Herzegovina throughout the year 2018 and ›only‹ 4000 were still stranded in the country at the beginning of 2019. Certainly not all of them managed to continue their journey to EU and some headed to Serbia. Nonetheless the route was still considered as successful.

tors working in national and transnational contexts on the other, then the hypothesis of a mere national sovereign control over the state border seems to be standing on weak grounds. For example, migrant agency considerably affects the ways in which the route is managed by state and non-state authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The protests of refugees and migrants for their right to freedom of movement, which resulted in the police closure of the Maljevac border crossing between Bosnia and Croatia for days during the winter of 2018, resulted in the EU abandoning its determination to prevent the establishment of reception facilities at the northern Bosnian border.[9] by refusing to finance them (Ahmetašević/Mlinarević 2019). Although the newly established reception camps in Velika Kladuša and Bihać run by the IOM and finally financed by the EU function as a partial separation of migrants and refugees from local societies that support them, there are certainly continuous struggles in those camps to reappropriate them, by turning them into places of rest and recuperation before taking hazardous journeys to the north. Migrant agency is also perceptible on the other side of the Schengen divide. For example, Slovene authorities often complain about refugees and migrants ›abusing‹ the right to asylum by entering into official asylum procedures and then continuing their journey further north after a short period of recuperation (although risking to be deported back to Slovenia due to the Dublin agreement).

Furthermore, the hypothesis of a return of the sovereign nation state at the border should be rejected if we take into consideration the various actors and agencies participating in the attempts to restore the European border and migration regime. Even though it comes to push backs, it is a narrow perspective to read into state practices an exercise of exclusive state monopoly over force and norm. Consider, for example, the reaction of the EU core states and institutions to the already well-documented practices of police violence at borders in the Balkans. After such reports became public and even reported in international media, the EU even increased funds given to Croatia to control EU borders with Angela Merkel publicly praising Croatian efforts.[10] Thus, the spectacle of sovereign violence of Balkan nation states did not trigger the same reactions as the one on the Hungarian border with Croatia and Serbia. And there is certainly a difference in the *border dispositif* when it comes to Hungary or Croatia and Slovenia. While the Hungarian wall with its notorious transit zones actually tends to hermetically seal the border, the securitized Slovenian and Croatian borders tend to sieve and differentiate (by assigning different legal statuses and access to rights)

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9 | Prior to this protest the EU refused to finance the establishment of such facilities close to EU border.

10 | See for example the report of Hina (2018).

the so called ›mixed flow‹. Sovereign violence is therefore functional and subordi-
nate to the *regime* whose aim is rather »to control migration flows and to regulate
the porosity of borders« (Papadopoulos/Stephenson/Tsianos 2008: 175). And that is
exactly the reason why various initiatives to monitor state violence at borders are so
valuable. Not only because they point to the violent and repressive nature of the state
but also because they show that the European way of restoring and strengthening con-
trol over mobility implies the use of arbitrary (sovereign) violence and could not be
achieved if based on respect of human rights and the rule of law. Various monitoring
projects and reports thus call the bluff that there is a humane and human rights based
liberal alternative to the bluntly brutal sovereignist approach of Orban's Hungary and
Salvini's Italy. Such a fake alternative has lately seriously shrunken the public and
political space for a radical critique of the European migration and border regime.
The necessity for reconquering such space certainly drives our quest for propagating
a political counter-hegemonic articulation of heterogeneous assemblages of mobility,
rather than universalist human rights discourses.

THE UNCERTAIN ARTICULATION
OF THE BORDER REGIME IN BOSNIA

Claiming the restoration of the EUropean border and migration regime in the case
of the EUropean Croatian border and the Schengen Slovenian border plays a kind
of already familiar tune. State repression with police violence against refugees and
migrants, combined with the increasingly restrictive asylum and foreigner legislation
that is often at odds with various international conventions and laws, has a rather
functional meaning for the post-national *regime of mobility control*. Its aim is not
to reestablish the sovereign states' control over national borders and their exclusive
exercise of monopoly over force and norm, but it is rather the management of the
hierarchical porosity of EUropean borders.

   The EUropean border and migration regime in Bosnia and Herzegovina articulates
itself much more ambivalently. Not in the sense that the sovereign paradigm would
resist the externalization of the EUropean migration management to BiH, since BiH is
a protectorate of the international community in which the EU has determining role,
but in the sense that the so called refugee and migration crisis accentuates already
strong centrifugal and disintegrating forces inside of BiH. The attempts to control
and tame migrant itineraries and movements by establishing firm control over mi-

grant routes additionally destabilizes the Bosnian state,[11] which, since its inception, struggles to avoid a new dissolution along ethnic lines and to overcome the constitutional impasses defined in its founding Dayton agreement in 1995 (Mujagić 2010). To turn Bosnia and Herzegovina into a EUropean borderland means to additionally fuel these internal ethno-nationalisms and to additionally marginalize the public authorities of the multiethnic state. A local articulation of the EUropean border and migration regime in BiH thus highlights the ways in which the so called Europeanization in general undermines the very possibility for this multiethnic state and society to exist and thrive in the future. Struggles for freedom of movement and the attempts to enforce control over mobility on that section of the Balkan route are a kind of a litmus test to assess not only the level of the so called Europeanessnes of BiH but also the persistence of local counter-hegemonic discourses and practices. These historic discourses and practices are the legacy of the multiethnic and mixed society that resisted the modern sovereign state in its nation form. Combined with the contemporary migrant subjectivities they compose new assemblages of mobility.

First groups of transit migrants began to travel through Bosnia and Herzegovina in the spring of 2018. At the very beginning, the local communities along the route—namely in Sarajevo, Bihać and Velika Kladuša—openly expressed considerable solidarity. This was soon to be changed. Early in 2018, the Islamska zajednica (Islamic Community) announced the closure of mosques as sites providing assistance to refugees and migrants (see Islamska zajednica 2018). According to our informants, this statement led to a significant demobilization of religious people that previously provided support to people on the move. During an interview, the journalist and editor of FB page Izbjeglice u Velikoj Kladuši (Refugees in Velika Kladuša), Amir Purić, claimed that this suspension must have been issued after an intervention from the Bosniac political establishment. When the high official from the Austrian Interior Ministry, Peter Weber, stated at the end of May 2018 that one should stop talking about the Balkan route and rather use the name Mosque route instead,[12] mosques were already closed for refugees and migrants. Against expectations of European islamophobes, Muslim cosmopolitanism in BiH therefore does not compose assemblages of mobility with migrants and refugees that are predominantly from majority

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11 | We acknowledge the conceptual difference between itineraries and routes introduced by Casas Cortes, Cobarrubias and Pickles (2015: 900): »Routes refer to the ways in which migration management seeks to channel movements into migration routes, whereas itineraries refers to the migrants' paths and passages whose spatial configurations always exceed the ability of formal routes management to synthesize and regulate them.«

12 | See, for example, the report of Radio Slobodna Evropa (2018).

Muslim countries. The reason for this is partly the pressure of European islamophobia itself. Based on interviews with officials from the BiH Ministry of Interior, local experts on migrant route, and various religious practitioners, we claim that the caution in dealing with refugees and migrants in BiH is connected to prejudices of the European public towards Bosnia and Herzegovina being a potential breeding ground for Islamic extremism and terrorism. Local Serbian and Croatian nationalist political establishments (that continuously push for a final territorial separation of BiH across ethno-national lines) on the other hand exploit and accentuate islamophobia by portraying migrants and refugees as part of a Bosniac plan to Islamize Bosnia and Herzegovina.[13] They are directing the migrants to areas with Bosniac majority and refusing to establish any reception facilities under their jurisdiction, or at least trying to obstruct their establishment as the case of Salakovac in Herzegovina showed[14]. Furthermore, as the result of war in BiH at the beginning of 1990's, local Islam is not exempted from the widespread processes of ethnonationalization. The Dayton constitution pushes ethnic communities to become ethno-national, and since ethnic divisions in BiH are defined upon religious belongings, Islam has inevitably become nationalized. During our research conducting interviews with religious people we often encountered racist claims of civilizational superiority of Bosnians and, thus, of European Muslims being superior to those coming from the Middle East.

Easily perceived hostility of a growing part of the local population in the border area with Croatia (Una-Sana Canton) is generally assigned to the fact that the local and national authorities are not able or willing to provide reception and accommodation facilities for stranded migrants. But such ›mismanagement‹ of the situation needs to be understood as a clear result of the EU model to externalize the border and migration regime. In practice, the EU completely ignores BiH authorities and directly finances the IOM to run reception camps in Velika Kladuša and Bihać and to provide surveillance, repressive equipment, and training to the local cantonal police (Ahmetašević/Mlinarević 2019). The EU is, thus, effectively establishing and financing a parallel government of the whole border area. Growing monopoly over the management of reception facilities by the IOM is supported by arbitrary actions of local and cantonal authorities that attack transit migrants and criminalize solidarity.

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13 | See, for example, Dodik 2018.

14 | In May 2018 authorities of Herzegovina-Neretva Canton tried to obstruct authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina to establish refugee camp in Salakovac. The police of the canton that has Croat majority temporarily blocked state organized busses with refugees on the way to newly established camp. Republika Srbska authorities on the other hand strictly refuse to establish any reception facilities.

For example, authorities of Una-Sana Canton issued a prohibition to provide services to migrants on the canton territory (i.e. accommodation and transport). Their cantonal police prevents the internal movement of migrants from south and inland Bosnia to the Una-Sana Canton border region by evicting migrants at the southern cantonal border from buses and trains through blatant racial profiling (Hadžimušić 2018). Municipal authorities in Velika Kladuša started a smear campaign against local citizens providing support to migrants. This affirmation of a parastate actor such as the IOM certainly corresponds to the otherwise deeply entrenched colonial prejudices of Bosnia and Herzegovina as an ›endemically chaotic borderland‹ (New Keywords Collective 2015) with a population incapable to govern itself. The ungovernability of Bosnia, which has to be regarded as the result of neocolonial power arrangements, therefore significantly defines the ways in which the European border and migration regime articulates itself locally.

But there is another meaning of Bosnia's alleged ungovernability that is expressed in the popular saying »No one ever ruled Bosnia, they just pretended they did« (Sa Bosnom niko nije vladao, samo mu se pričinilo). Despite the mentioned growing hostility toward people on the move, a considerable openness of the Bosnian society towards refugees and migrants, towards alterity, can still be observed. While distance and hostility resonate with the prevalent public discourse of exclusivism and intolerance, a myriad of solidarity acts still exist outside the public space and discourse. There is a continuity between solidarity engagement with refugees and migrants and previous struggles of refusing and subverting projects of hegemony, either on a personal level, on the level of shared experiences, or even on the level of a shared memory of the territory. People supporting refugees and migrants that we talked to were either themselves refugees during nationalist aggressions or were involved in previous mobilizations displaying a refusal of ethno-nationalist divisions (such as large protests in February 2014 and massive solidarity responses in the time of floods in May 2014).

Another popular expression »mirna Bosna« (peaceful, inert Bosnia) implies the understanding that any homogenizing form is violently imposed as well as the awareness that all constellations of power are transient and prone to demise. Such attitude evolved during the turbulent history of conquests and alterations of various imperial powers and turned Bosnia into a ›corpus separatum‹ of European modernity (Mujkić 2019: 10). Bosnia is thus a »body that is not uniform, homogeneous, but is made out of differences in constant process of differentiation. An integralist eye could interpret this as a confusing des-integration, while it is actually a qualitatively new aspect of integration« (ibid.). The Europeanization of Bosnia silences such counter-hegemonic discourses. Imperceptible politics of migrants (Papadopoulos/Stephenson/Tsianos

2008) make it perceptible again and call for a postcolonial critique in a geopolitical region from which it was until now excluded. Localities along the Balkan route, like Bosnia, are denied political and epistemological self-determination—historically at first during nationalist aggression and subsequently by imposed neocolonial constitution. Such diminished capacity of a geopolitical territory to think itself exists all along the post-Yugoslav section of the Balkan route.[15] Hence, it is interesting to see how mobility struggles contribute to a potential for epistemological and political emancipation by composing assemblages of mobility with subaltern local legacies and counter-hegemonic discourses.

CONCLUSION

After the closure of the formalized corridor in March 2016 and the renewed illegalization and criminalization of transit migration through the Balkans, two questions seem to be particularly challenging. First, are we witnessing the restoration of the EUropean *border regime*, or does the post-corridor situation on the Balkan route rather point to a *sovereignist response* to the epochal opening of the borders of EUrope in 2015? Second, what are possible discursive strategies to relaunch a radical critique of EUropean migration and border policies when the EUropean public space seems to be completely exhausted by the putative alternative between post-national EUropean and national sovereignist response to the so called migration crisis?

   Considering the short description of the history of the formalized corridor and the analysis of the role of post-Yugoslav states in repressing and criminalizing transit migration, we claim that excessive state violence does not suggest the return of nation state sovereignty in migration and border control. Instead, spectacular state violence related to the militarization of borders and more clandestine forms of state violence, such as push backs, serve rather functional purposes for the regime of mobility control and the management of porous borders. The aforementioned state violence of Croatia and Slovenia invalidates the assumption that there is no contradiction between the restoration of the EUropean border regime and the protection of human rights and the rule of law. When the crown argument of proponents of the EUropean solution to so called migration and border crisis vanishes, new discursive strategies to criticize

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15 | By claiming this we certainly do not ignore the rich and authentic critical theory production still existing in post-Yugoslav space.

and oppose violence against people on the move and to affirm the potential of human mobility for social change are needed.

Our rejection of the hypothesis of a return of the sovereign state is certainly based on facts while our concern is simultaneously epistemological. Such hypothesis also needs to be rejected within the field of knowledge production, as theories on the autonomy of migration convincingly show. What we call »immanentization« of power allows us to understand migrant agency as constitutive of the migration and border regime. Having in mind the urgent need to define new discursive strategies to criticize border violence and to affirm the political potential of migration, we have pushed the ideas discussed in regime theories a bit further, understanding migrant agency as constituting assemblages of mobility, or ecologies of mobile existence, with local agencies that escape the sovereign imperative. Such an expansion of the concept of mobile commons (Papadopoulos/Tsianos 2013) provided us with a specific vantage point, a hybrid locus of enunciation (Mignolo 2012), to rewrite the recent history of the Balkan route and its post-corridor presence. Highlighting the ways in which mobility and locality mutually articulate, and, through this, achieving a most needed reconciliation between these seemingly exclusive agencies, sheds a new light on struggles for freedom of movement. By constituting assemblages of mobility, they have the potential to prompt a dormant critique of colonial power that is so deeply entrenched in European modernity.

Where else could we perceive the political potential of migration as a powerful agent of decolonization so clearly? The post-Yugoslav European borderland, that has been a laboratory of Europeanization for the last thirty years, a site of a ›civilizing‹ mission that systematically diminishes forms of being in common based on diversity and alterity, is placed under scrutiny again. Can it be trusted in its role as EUropean border? While local rulers do everything to reassure their EUropean masters, a myriad of struggles for freedom of movement and acts of solidarity by local people contribute to Europe's opening. This is where the dignity of migrants and refugees corresponds with the epistemological dignity of silenced, local altermodern legacies.

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Civil initiative **Info Kolpa** started in the spring of 2018 as a response to illegal actions of Slovene police, which started systematically denying people the right to seek asylum in Slovenia and pushing people back to Croatia. In the autumn of 2018, we established an informal telephone number for assistance to people wishing to seek asylum in Slovenia. The help we provided proved unsuccessful but with operating the number, we gained a lot of information on practice of push-backs on Slovene-Croatian border, which we presented to Slovene and international public.

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Zita Seichter, **Miriam Neßler** and **Paul Knopf** met each other at Bauhaus-University Weimar in 2017. Today, they are studying Art and Architecture, Urban Studies as well as Human Geography and Regional Development in Weimar, Berlin and Eberswalde. Besides being interested in border regime practices in Belgrade and beyond, they are involved in activist and artistic contexts, researching and teaching on Solidarity Cities, the Right to the City, transformation strategies from a decolonizing perspective as well as art and architecture in the context of the Anthropocene. Related publication: Eckardt, Frank / Neßler, Miriam / Seichter, Zita (Hg.) (2019): Weit weg und unbeachtet. Stadt und Flüchtende in Belgrad seit Schließung der Balkanroute.

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