

“Whether we will have a better world or not depends on us”

Interview mit Ekaterina Lemonjava

Carla Küffner

Abstract In this interview, Ekaterina Lemonjava tells about her travel through Europe influenced by the Dublin Regulation. In 2012, Lemonjava initiated a common hunger strike in four closed asylum centers in Poland to protest against the living conditions, while herself being detained. She explains how she created a network of participants and supporters and how she made their demands public in Polish society. The protest was followed by a monitoring of an independent NGO, stating significant changes to the regime in closed centers two years later.

Zum ersten Mal habe ich Ekaterina letztes Jahr getroffen, als wir von München aus gemeinsam nach Luxemburg getrampt sind. Wir waren auf dem Weg zum March for Freedom of Movement¹ von Straßburg nach Brüssel. Auf unserer Reise hat sie mir vom Hungerstreik in polnischen Haftzentren für Migrant_innen 2012 erzählt. Stück für Stück wurde mir klar, dass diese Aktion, von der ich viel gelesen und gehört hatte, von ihr koordiniert worden ist. Obwohl sie selbst in Lesznawola inhaftiert war, gelang es ihr, in vier der sechs geschlossenen Camps gleichzeitig Proteste zu initiieren. Diese führten schließlich dazu, dass in Polen ein Inhaftierungsverbot für Kinder und Schwangere beschlossen wurde. Trotz laufender Ermittlungen wegen Amtsmissbrauch gegen das Wachpersonal des Camps in Lesznawola wurde Ekaterina gemeinsam mit anderen in den Hungerstreik involvierten Aktivist_innen im Anschluss aus Polen abgeschoben. Ich fragte sie: „Wie praktizierst du Widerstand, während du in einem dir fremden Land in Haft bist? Unter so schwierigen Voraussetzungen, ohne

¹ <http://freedomnotfrontex.noblogs.org/>

polnisch zu verstehen oder zu sprechen, ohne ein lokales soziales Netzwerk?“ Während wir unseren Daumen heraushalten und auf unsere erste Mitfahrt warten, erzählt mir Ekaterina die Geschichte des Protestes. Sie beginnt mit ihren Gründen, Georgien zu verlassen, wo sie die Inhaberin eines Rock-Clubs in Tiflis war.

Georgia has a very rich culture. You probably know that, five to six years ago, skeletons of the first Europeans was discovered in Georgia? For politicians, Georgia has the status of a safe third country. So, what does it mean to be a citizen of Georgia? Unfortunately, it means to be in big shit. There is no division between personal and public life; there is no justice (and besides, the meaning of justice is often changed); law is not functioning; and my own residential life depends on my rich and influential father, on my lover, or on government relations.

Some years ago, Europe and the U.S. proudly told Georgian citizens that Georgia is a democratically developing country and that they supported political authorities there. Yet during that same period, Georgia was actually ruled by a criminal system: police personnel raped people in jails, the security department from the Ministry of Interior killed people, and racketeering developed in business. Then, the government changed. But the new authorities declared that their politics is cohabitation with the former government, thus with criminals, with people who raped prisoners with brooms, who killed many young people, who kept 60-70% of their population in psychological terror.

So, Georgian citizens had many reasons to leave Georgia.

I owned a rock club in Tbilisi during many years. One day, people from the security service of the Ministry of Interior kidnapped me from my club. The club was at that time the only free and independent art place in Tbilisi. They wanted me to provide them information about people frequenting my club. It was a time when I hated myself. It was the first time when I could not carry myself. I called people to help me. Opposition politicians, press, and usual citizens stood by my side. We made a big noise against the security service. I was in danger because I fought against a monster system in a very dangerous period. Three weeks after this action, I organized a big rock concert, 'Rock against violence' and left the business I loved, my family and my friends. The last words that I told to my country were: I apologize because my dignity is worth more than being your soldier.

And so the second part of my adventure started; I went to Norway. In the police-station where I asked for help, I showed my passport including the Polish visa. I did not know about the procedures, I did not have time to ask someone

what and how to do, and I could not imagine that I needed to lie in Europe. I chose Norway because of Knut Hamsun, the Norwegian author awarded the Nobel Prize. Since I read his 'Mysteries' for the first time, I wanted to visit this country. This was the only reason why I went to Norway. But first Norway and afterward Sweden told me to leave the country because of the Dublin II-Regulation. I agreed to go to Poland, as first EU-country which I entered. I had real problems and I needed protection.

Plötzlich hält ein Auto. Der Fahrer bietet an, uns bis nach Augsburg mitzunehmen. Wunderbar! Wir steigen ein und er erzählt uns, dass er in München beim indischen Konsulat um ein Visum angesucht hat, um einige Monate in einem Ashram zu verbringen. Entsprechend entspannt ist die Fahrt mit ihm. Ekaterina fährt fort, zu erzählen. Von Norwegen aus reist sie nach Schweden und wird von dort unter der Dublin-Verordnung nach Polen abgeschoben. In Polen kommt es immer wieder zur Inhaftierung von abgeschobenen Personen, um einem möglichen Untertauchen entgegen zu wirken.

In Sweden, I was told by immigration center staff that in Poland someone from the migration service will meet me to take me into the camp. Do you remember the novel 'The Trial' by Kafka? Something very strange like in this book happened to me. Border guards arrested me. No one explained what happened, which procedures I had to endure, who the people were that related with me. On their T-shirts I read 'border guards' but I could not understand what they wanted from me, they laughed at me, and they forced me three times in 28 hours to stay naked. They put me for one night in custody. Only on the second day a translator came and told me that on my way from Sweden I crossed the air border to Poland illegally. Therefore, I was put into a detention center for two months.

I had the feeling that everything that happened was a bad dream, but when the guards put me in a car for criminals and when the driver switched on the siren, I started to think maybe I killed someone and cannot remember, or did some terrorist act, or did something which my brain is hiding from me? The guard who was sitting close to me looked into my eyes, and I was very proud to confront him with my tears. The moment I was harassed by guards with smile on their faces, I was naked. I swore Poland to fight for my dignity.

In Augsburg angekommen machen wir uns auf die Suche nach der nächsten Mitfahrt. An der Tankstelle lernen wir einen anderen Tramper kennen, der schon seit geraumer Zeit wartet. Wir beschließen, es gemeinsam zu versuchen. Während er uns etwas auf der Gitarre vorspielt, stoppt ein weißer Kleinbus

mit zwei Personen. Einer von ihnen ist selbst Tramper. Wir klettern in den Bus und es entwickelt sich ein Gespräch über die Kunst des Trampens. Als wir aussteigen sind wir bereits kurz vor Frankfurt. Jetzt ist die Herausforderung, ein Auto zu finden, das nicht Richtung Frankfurt fährt, sondern dessen Route westwärts nach Luxemburg führt. Uns ist klar, dass das ein bisschen dauern kann. Ich frage Ekaterina nach den Strategien des Widerstandes in einem Land, in dem sie nie zuvor war. Wie ist sie vorgegangen, um Menschen in Polen und darüber hinaus ihre Aktionen bekannt zu machen, wie gelang es ihr, sich an sie zu wenden?

Poland is a post-Soviet country, and has a Soviet mentality until now. A Soviet mind means that a country does not know human rights and discrimination; they only hear about values of international conventions. Until now, Poland does not believe that they are part of the group of big progressive countries, but still lives by Soviet memories.

So, after court, border guards took me into prison, which is called – out of political correctness – “closed camp”. In Białystok, a prison for male migrants, the prisoners call this place “concentration camp”. And it is true.

In the prison, we were many people from many countries, including children, pregnant women and disabled people. We were without names, just numbers. I remember all the time one story – when I came into this prison, there was one woman who could not stand up. The order guards did not allow us to bring any food from the kitchen to this woman. When I shouted to the guards and protested against this rule, migrants told me: “Ekaterina, please, don’t do this, the woman is pretending”. Guards, nurses, the boss of the prison and psychologist, everyone spread incorrect information to isolate this woman from others. And they succeeded. She was alone in her room and no one visited her. Instead, everyone hated her as a liar. When I started to protect her, everybody was surprised. To protect someone in the prison means to be against yourself. Guards write everything that is important for the court in a notebook, and the migrant’s future depends on this notebook. Every day, the guards note down your behavior, whether you are aggressive or quiet. And after two months, the court will decide what to do based on this notebook. When I was in prison, I was indifferent to everything, but I could not stand knowing that there is a woman starving. And finally, after a lot of shouting and many disappointments, guards allowed providing this woman with food. I saw how people, other migrants, changed after this – they tried to bring food for Maya, or do something pleasant for her.

Es beginnt zu regnen, erst ganz leicht, dann immer mehr. Bald wird es dunkel.

Heute werden wir es wohl kaum mehr bis nach Luxemburg schaffen. Was machen wir also? Wir entscheiden uns, Personen direkt anzusprechen, ob sie uns mitnehmen, anstatt darauf zu warten, dass jemand von sich aus anhält. Ohne Erfolg. Das schlägt auf unsere Stimmung. Wir machen aus, das nächste Auto das stoppt, nehmen wir, egal wohin es fährt. Der nächste Fahrer der anhält fährt zum Flughafen Frankfurt. Der Flughafen soll ja angeblich ein super Platz zum Übernachten sein, oder? Genau! Die Grundsatzentscheidungen sind erst mal getroffen und Ekaterina kommt auf die Situation in der Haft zurück:

The guards took off everything from me – my laptop, my mobile phone. They told us we were not allowed to have anything that has a camera. They did not allow me to make a phone call, not even to contact a lawyer; they did not give me my medicine. I bought a mobile phone without a camera and started calling NGOs all over Poland. My activities coincided with the fact that one young man from Paris and one young woman from Warsaw visited the prison to speak with migrants – they worked in this case. I told them that Poland broke my rights and that I will fight. So, these young people promised me to help if I needed it. In Poland, there are six administration prisons for migrants. I called in four of them and offered them to participate in a big hunger-strike. People in all of these prisons agreed, but I needed to plan everything in detail. Because behind me were many people and I was responsible of them; I needed to do everything for their safety – everyone knew that it was a big possibility for the guards to take us in isolation detention, beat us or punish us in another way.

Am Frankfurter Flughafen anzukommen ist beeindruckend. Auf der einen Seite Inbegriff der Mobilität und Bewegungsfreiheit, auf der anderen Seite werden von hier aus täglich an die zehn Abschiebungen durchgeführt. Wir finden einen recht gemütlichen und ruhigen Platz auf ein paar Stühlen und rollen unsere Schlafsäcke aus. Ich möchte gerne verstehen, welches Wissen Ekaterina genutzt hat, um den Hungerstreik, die komplette Aktion durchzuführen, woher wusste sie, was zu tun war? Mich interessiert, welches Bild, welche Nachrichten in die Öffentlichkeit durchdrangen und wie in der polnischen Öffentlichkeit auf den Hungerstreik reagiert wurde.

I did not have any knowledge of migration movements. I did not know my rights as a migrant, but I knew my human rights as a person. For many years, I did marketing and management for my rock club, and since this club used to be very popular in Tbilisi, I knew how to manage an action and have a result.

I wanted to do a documentary movie about this action – as an example of successful protest. To show that we can do important changes in our lives, if

we see a problem in the right way and take a right decision.

So, one day, we, people from four prisons simultaneously started a hunger-strike. At the same time, the group of young people outside helped organize a press conference. They translated our demands in five languages and spread it in five countries. After some days, the biggest newsletter in Poland published my article "I'll tell everyone about hell in Poland"² – it was the peak of our protest. The Polish Ministry of Interior reacted the same day by announcing to investigate the situation in prisons for migrants. The Ministry created a special monitoring group, the state prosecutor launched an investigation based on my article. Polish citizens either supported us or were against us, and many people in many European countries made an action to support us. After some months, the monitoring report "Migration is not a crime"³ was published by the critical NGO Association for Legal Intervention and the Helsinki Committee. And after some more months, Poland changed its migration law. As far as I know, the law changed in many cases for the better. For example, Poland will not arrest families with children under 15 years anymore, as well as pregnant women and people with disabilities.⁴

Other migrants from this protest action and I received many support letters from people in many European countries. Until now I am in close contact with people who helped us during the hunger-strike – without them, I would not have hoped that Poland would ever develop as a democratic state. And until now I'm thankful for their support.

Am nächsten Morgen nimmt uns ein alter Mann vom Flughafen in Richtung der Grenze zwischen Deutschland und Luxemburg mit. Wir nähern uns langsam unserem Ziel. Der nächste Fahrer, der uns eine Mitfahrt anbietet, ist ein italienischer Eisverkäufer. Während er Eiszutaten bestellt, warten wir im Auto und ich frage Ekaterina nach Parallelen zu anderen Protesten.

As I told you, I did not have any information about migrant movements before. In my mind Europe was a guarantee for justice, no other information on Europe is circulated in my country. I know about migrant movements since my return

² http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,12741561,Gruzinska_dziennikarka___Opowiem_calej_Europie_o_polskim.html

³ <http://interwencjaprawna.pl/wp-content/uploads/migration-is-not-a-crime.pdf>

⁴ In einem Monitoring Report der Asssocation for Legal Intervention 2014 wird dazu festgehalten: „The changes (in Polish law) included but were not limited to implementing a ban of detaining children under the age of 15 in guarded centres and adopting provisions that require the court examining the issue of detaining minors in guarded centres to take children's interests into account.“; <http://interwencjaprawna.pl/wp-content/uploads/still-behind-bars.pdf>.

to Georgia. I contacted the people who were supporting me during hunger-strike. We are still friends and for two years, we manage actions together on the international migrant day of December 18th including in America and Australia.⁵

My life is divided into before and after Poland.

I know, whether we will have a better world or not depends on us. We make each other stronger. And do you remember? Life is rock 'n' roll and there is no barrier that cannot be overcome!

Life is rock 'n' roll. Dieser Satz von ihr charakterisiert für mich die gesamte Reise. In Trier, an der Grenze, versuchen wir ein letztes Mal, eine Mitfahrt zu bekommen. Ein Auto stoppt. Der Fahrer rät uns, den Zug zu nehmen. Zu der Tageszeit würde fast niemand in unsere Richtung unterwegs sein. Aber wir wollen es schaffen – und versuchen es weiter. Irgendwann wird klar, dass es bald dunkel wird. Und heute wollen wir wirklich in Luxemburg ankommen. Plötzlich hält wieder ein Auto, es ist der gleiche Fahrer wie vorher. Er bietet an, uns zum Bahnhof zu fahren – und dieses Mal nehmen wir an. So reisen wir den letzten Teil unseres Trips per Bahn. Was die Möglichkeiten von Protest angeht, sagt mir Ekaterina:

Being a migrant means to be a person without rights. Some times without the right to life. In January 2014, Greece border guards operated a pushback operation close to the island Farmakonisi against a boat with migrants from Asian countries and killed 12 persons, most of them women and children.⁶ I was shocked when I heard about it. One month after this tragedy, a similar incident happened near the Moroccan-Spanish border – the guards shot with rubber bullets at a boat full of people. What is our reaction as a society regarding this information? Nothing. We just wrote some protest letters and shared between us our angry feelings. What did authorities do? Nothing. They are border guards and have the right to "secure the border". But where is the fundamental right to life? Why is the right to life, the right to movement determined by our nationality and geographical places? How is it possible to be illegal in the world? The right to movement is the oldest right of humanity and no one can limit it.

This is not a world by completed values. We people will fight for a better life. No one can forbid it.

⁵ <http://18dsolidarity.wordpress.com/>

⁶ http://www.proasyl.de/de/news/detail/news/tod_im_schlepptau_der_kuestenwache/;
http://www.proasyl.de/de/themen/eu-politik/detail/news/tod_im_schlepptau_der_griechischen_kuestenwache-1/

In Luxemburg lesen wir die Nachricht, dass zwölf Aktivist_innen vom Marsch wegen der Aktionen an diesem Tag in Haft sind. Doch als wir schließlich dort ankommen, wo die Zelte stehen, sind alle bereits zurück. Vor dem Gefängnis wurde so lange getrommelt und protestiert, bis die Freilassung verhandelt werden konnte. Unsere Reise ist beendet und wir werden Teil des Marsches.

Thank you, Ekaterina!

Zur Frage, was sich durch den Hungerstreik in polnischen Haftzentren verändert hat, gab die polnische Organisation Association for Legal Intervention 2014 einen Bericht heraus. Dieselbe Organisation war direkt nach den Protesten mit der Untersuchung der Vorwürfe betraut gewesen. Die Veränderungen, die sie nun feststellte, beschreibt der Bericht wie folgt:

„The monitoring revealed significant changes, in particular to the regime in guarded centres. There is a uniform internal order in all guarded centres. In addition to that:

- Foreigners are allowed to move freely within the centre and walking time restrictions were dropped;
- There are no informal disciplinary measures, such as a ban on walking or restricting access to a phone;
- There are less restrictions on the use of phones by foreigners;
- Morning and evening assembly calls are no longer taking place;
- Foreigners do not have to appear at meals;
- Personal searches and searches in foreigners' rooms have been reduced;
- Shopping is done more frequently;
- Foreigners do not have to clean common rooms anymore;
- The facilities have been equipped with recreation appliances (gyms, game consoles etc.);
- There are separate rooms ensured for families staying in a guarded centre;
- Foreigners accepted into guarded centres undergo screening for infectious diseases;
- Works related to providing access to the Internet in guarded centres have commenced.

Carla Küffner: "Whether we will have a better world or not depends on us"

Therefore, it must be said that promises of the Ministry of the Interior as regards actual conditions of stay have been met to a large extent."⁷

Currently, Ekaterina Lemonjava is back in Poland. She took part in the Anti-Frontex Action Days in Warsaw and presented her book about the protest experiences in the Lesznowola detention center. In order to publish her book independently, funds are raised to print the book. To support Ekaterina's book publication online, donate here: [Donate](#)

For more info, please contact: noiWarszawa@autistici.org

⁷ <http://interwencjaprawna.pl/wp-content/uploads/still-behind-bars.pdf>

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Autor_innen

Carla Küffner hat Internationale Entwicklung an der Universität Wien studiert und promoviert zum Thema Verhandlungen über Abschiebungen.

Empfohlene Zitierweise

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