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Populist Variations on Migration: Floating Signifiers of Mobility in the Context of the 'Balkan Route' and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

By focusing on the ongoing events of the so-called 'Balkan Route' and the Covid-19 pandemic this paper explores how the populist representations of migrants in the Western Balkans rest on specific historically embedded framings of migration. Based on long-term ethnographic insights and media analysis in Serbia the paper explores how the images of (good/bad) migrants tend to play out as unstable 'floating signifiers' in particular ways which is grounded on ambivalent perceptions of primarily two legacies and patterns of migration crucial for the region: work migration and forced migration. The paper traces how, firstly, the image of the diligent work migrant loyal to nationalist politics can surprisingly easily turn into one of the irresponsible and threatening figure of the returning work migrant as the very culprit of the pandemic (spreading the virus and taking advantage of the health system). The paper explores how this ambivalent image of the work migrant is based in the particular history and transformation of emigration from former Yugoslavia to Western Europe since the 1960s and its interrelation with populist nationalism. Secondly, I will argue that the 'usage' of the image of the 'Muslim migrant' along the so-called 'Balkan Route' seems to be 'flexible' and 'variable' due to the particular history and presence of Muslim populations in the region. The 'Muslim migrant' can thus easily simultaneously or alternately appear as subject of legitimate humanitarian aid and freedom of movement (with no reference to religion at all), as well as the threatening 'Muslim other'.

Introduction

What leaves one puzzled when exploring migration experiences and regimes in former Yugoslavia is the differential treatment and (self-)perception of particular migrant populations over time. These patterns of representation and policy in a European region marked by intense, violent and complex histories of migration, and the way they have been changing, are highly revealing of the workings of (hegemonic) ideologies as well as their potential for transformation and collapse.

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At different points in time the very same (migrant) population—depending on the political moment—has been potentially represented in diametrically opposed terms. An exemplary case is the exodus of the Serbian population from Croatia in August 1995.¹ This by and large sidelined and silenced chapter in the history of the wars in former Yugoslavia is at least as revealing of populist-nationalist ideology and politics in Serbia as the one in Croatia (of which it is the direct result). Namely, as soon as the refugees from Croatia arrived in Serbia—if not forcibly resettled to Kosovo in the service of the Milošević regime's nationalist demographic strategy—they stopped being (identified and gendered as) 'Serbian brothers', but instead were branded 'traitors', 'losers' and 'Croats' in public discourse and everyday interactions.

The more recent history of migration in the region also exemplifies how forced migration along the so-called 'Balkan Route' and work/irregular migration in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic figure as resources for populist politics in different, contradictory and surprising ways. By focusing on developments in Serbia and its embeddedness in transnational political configurations and hierarchies of power, this paper explores how the representation of migrants is used—and misused—in populist politics. As is widely known, the so-called 'refugee crisis' has been a welcome and successful legitimacy-resource for right-wing populist political forces across Europe (e.g., in Austria, Italy, Hungary) in their (at least temporary) rise to power, marked by anti-migrant, racist and Islamophobic rhetoric, and, consequently, policies. Scholars have recently been looking more closely at right-wing populism in Europe, and the promotion of anti-migrant sentiment as one of its pillars, in particular. They have been examining how the populist politics of affect works primarily by creating simplified images of 'good' and 'bad', and consequently 'deserving' or 'undeserving' migrant populations—in terms of, for example, legal status or social aid. Even though 'parsing moral deservingness'² along the binary of the 'deserving refugee' versus the 'undeserving migrant' has become an implication across the political spectrum, it features most prominently in right-wing and conservative assessments of the deservingness of refugees and migrants in terms of being 'real/fake' and 'economically useful' or 'integrable'.

By focusing on the so-called 'Balkan Route'—and relevant developments in Serbia in particular—this paper discusses how populist representations of migrants in the Western Balkans rest on specific historically embedded framings of migration. More precisely, it explores how these populist discourses draw on particular 'resources' and embody specific ways of framing and exploiting migration and migrants for political purposes, and, in turn, how these insights can be useful for explorations of populism in general. The core argument in the paper is that in the Western Balkans the images of (good/bad) migrants tend to be unstable in particular ways which are grounded in ambivalent perceptions of two main legacies and patterns of migration that are crucial for the region: work migration and forced migration.

In order to assess how these legacies impact on the representation of work migrants in the recent past and the present, the paper focuses on the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the contested representation of refugees during the so-called 'refugee crisis' in Serbia as a 'station' on or 'fraction' of the 'Balkan Route'. Based on long-term (auto)ethnographic work in the region³ as well as the continuous tracking of political and media discourses, this paper traces how the image of the diligent work migrant loyal to nationalist politics can easily turn into that of the irresponsible and threatening subject.

A focus on the Covid-19 pandemic shows with particular clarity how mobile populations are exploited for political goals (in particular, but not only, by the populist right) and how the threat the pandemic represents can trigger surprising and changing new ideological framings of migrants. In that sense, ‘national’ work migrants (by and large irregular and precarious workers) returning to Serbia were portrayed as culprits in the pandemic who were spreading the virus and taking advantage of the health system. The paper puts forward the argument that one of the reasons for this might be an ambivalent image of the work migrant, which is based in the particular history and transformation of emigration from former Yugoslavia to Western Europe and its interrelation with populist nationalism.

Secondly, the paper shows that the ‘usage’ of the image of the ‘Muslim migrant’ in the case of Serbia seems to be ‘flexible’ and ‘variable’ due to the particular history and presence of Muslim populations in the region. The ‘Muslim migrant’ can thus easily simultaneously or alternately appear as the subject of legitimate humanitarian aid and freedom of movement (with no reference to religion at all), as well as the threatening ‘Muslim other’.

The paper will unfold in three sections: First, it will briefly sketch recent, primarily ethnographic, engagements with populism. Secondly, it will examine the history of migration and related patterns of representation and Othering in former Yugoslavia/Serbia. Finally, the paper will explore ‘variations’ in the populist exploitation of migration and work/forced migrants in contemporary Serbia by zooming in on the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ and the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the Serbian case, the conclusion will highlight how core terms relating to mobility, such as *migrant*, *refugee* and *diaspora*, figure as floating signifiers and as such: a) enable the ambiguity and flexibility of populist discursive framings of mobile populations to figure as a potential strength; b) and serve as instrument of internal boundary making within the right-wing populist ideological spectrum.

Populism: heuristics and recent ethnographic approaches

The topic of populism opens up a very broad theoretical space. In terms of a heuristic understanding of populism, I join Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser⁴ in their take on populism as a ‘thin-centred ideology’, a set of ideas that are related to very different, or even incompatible, ideological contents.⁵ This resonates with the seminal insight by Ernesto Laclau that ‘populism itself is not an ideology, but a form of the construction of the political based on invoking the subaltern against the rulers’.⁶ What the various types of populism have in common is the claim that politics is the expression of the will of the ‘common people’, ‘the people’, and always in contrast to ‘the elites’, ‘the intellectuals’ or—of prime relevance to this text—the ‘migrants’.

Analyses of populism are currently booming in anthropology. As Berger, Lems and Moderbacher have recently highlighted, the ‘discipline has now well and truly woken up to the fact that it needs to develop a new repertoire of methodological, ethical, and conceptual tools to be able to ethnographically capture the social worlds of people who support right-wing and neonationalist parties’.⁷ Early texts, such as Verena Stolcke’s⁸ influential article on cultural fundamentalism, were followed by a series of anthropological examinations of populism. To name just two well-known studies: while Douglas

Holmes refers to ‘Integralism’⁹ and Gingrich and Banks to ‘Neo-Nationalism’ in Europe,¹⁰ their approaches both assess the upswing of right-wing populism as a reaction to the cultural and socio-economic consequences of economic globalization, social pluralization, and polarization.

Especially relevant in this paper are insights on the differences between populisms in Western Europe and the Eastern European (post-socialist) context, in which the anti-migrant, Islamophobic and racist components (re-)emerge in particular historically embedded ways. Don Kalb’s¹¹ work on working-class populism in Poland, Chris Hann’s¹² theorization of ‘agrarian populism’ in Hungary or Theodora Vetta’s¹³ class-based analysis of the Serbian Radical Party’s rise to power in the late 2000s (see also below) are relevant examples. In this text, I build on Kalb’s¹⁴ insights on populism in the context of the conjuncture of neoliberalism, post-politics and the claims of the disenfranchised (working-class) population as the basis for the rise of different variations of populisms across Europe, as opposed to analytically Othering Eastern Europe/the Western Balkans as more populist or as populist in a ‘less modern’ way. To speak with Kalb, it is ‘the similar structural forces all over Europe that produce comparable though differently situated, proportioned, articulated and publicly signified outcomes’.¹⁵ Thus, a comparative take on populism in Eastern and Western Europe (while this very boundary is, of course, ambiguous and contested) as mutually illuminating makes most sense.

This paper aims contributing to this body of literature—namely, those approaches focusing on the particularities and histories of different populisms in Europe while never losing sight of the common structural conditions which co-produce them. It will do so by taking a look at populism in former Yugoslavia, Serbia in particular, through the lens of migration, by comparatively zooming in on populist discursive and political exploitations of migration.

Migration in the Western Balkans: histories of patterns of representation and othering in former Yugoslavia/Serbia

Historically former Yugoslavia has primarily been a space of emigration. Migration had both a negative connotation (as, e.g., in the case of political dissidents after WWII) and an ambivalent-positive one (as in the case of work migrants to Western Europe from the 1960s onwards). As opposed to citizens in most of Eastern Europe during real-socialism, Yugoslavs were encouraged to migrate and did so to such countries as Austria, Germany or Switzerland as a result of bilateral state agreements. As in the other Yugoslav Republics, most of the work migrants from Serbia came from rural regions and often led transnational lives regularly commuting to their home villages. The ambivalent image of the Serbian transnational work migrant is embodied in the emic term *gastarbajter* (or *gaster/gastos* in the urban slang),¹⁶ denoting a person who engages in ostentatious displays of the wealth gained abroad (cars, huge houses, statues and fountains in the yards, unpacked furniture, etc.) who is therefore both envied and ridiculed. On the other hand, the positive image of the migrant appears in terms of both financial and ideological support for populist-nationalist politics in Serbia. Pro-nationalist rallies in the diaspora—which I myself witnessed as a so-called second-generation migrant and student in Vienna in the 1990s—are apt examples in this

regard.¹⁷ In other words, the populist-nationalist regime in Serbia (under Milošević and Vučić, see below) relied on migrants both for remittances and ideological backing, while at the same time fearing the potential support for the political opposition among a transforming migrant population.

The ambivalence of the regime towards emigrants (as well as internal cleavages within the migrant population) grew as the demographic characteristics of the emigrants from Serbia transformed in the course of the wars in former Yugoslavia and the authoritarian rule coupled with a severe economic crisis in Serbia. The intense brain-drain and (forced) work/educational migration during the Milošević regime and up to the present day have significantly transformed the diaspora. Besides refugees from other parts of former Yugoslavia leaving their temporary home in Serbia and young men escaping military service, the majority of emigrants from the 1990s to date have been young and middle-aged citizens who oppose nationalist ideology (or who are completely disconnected from the party-political sphere) and (at least repeatedly, sometimes permanently) leave Serbia because they see it as a country where they and their children have no future. The transformed migrant population—which followed the ‘classic’ state-induced work migration—is very diverse and ranges from students, highly skilled migrants (medical/care specialists, IT specialists, etc.) to low-skilled workers, the latter often taking the path of repeated and irregular migration in order to provide for their families in Serbia. As will be elaborated below, it is the image of these migrants which is central in the migration discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There were three notable exceptions to the overall work emigration trend marking former Yugoslavia. The most well-known pattern comprised the immigration of large numbers of forced migrants who fled other (former) republics of Yugoslavia (e.g., to Serbia) in the course of the violent conflicts of the 1990s. The exodus of these people—as mentioned at the beginning of this paper by referring to the case of the refugees fleeing Croatia to Serbia—have disrupted and revealed the hypocrisy of populist nationalism. In this particular case, upon their arrival in Serbia, forced migrants were granted neither refugee status¹⁸ nor citizenship by the nationalist regime, which resulted in their dependence on the potential support of, for example, the Red Cross or their relatives (in Serbia or often work migrants). The othering processes and patterns in this case featured pronounced internal nationalism, framing refugees from Croatia (and in a similar way those fleeing the war in Bosnia) as ‘traitors’ to the ‘national cause’. Interestingly, as I could observe during my research in Belgrade,¹⁹ on the other hand, refugees from Croatia often expressed an orientalizing view of themselves as the ‘actual Serbs’ who had never ‘succumbed’ to the Ottoman Empire (unlike ‘oriental’ Serbia) and who had been able to sustain their national/religious identity even though being an oppressed minority in Croatia.

The two other immigration trajectories to Serbia, although less well-known and studied, are linked in interesting ways. While I was doing fieldwork on the ‘refugee crisis’ in Belgrade in summer 2015²⁰ in the parks next to the Bus Station where refugees gathered, the young Arabic-speaking Belgraders I encountered as translators and volunteers²¹ were often children of educational migrants who had come to study in Belgrade during the times of the Non-aligned Movement²² in which former Yugoslavia under Tito played a leading role. Here in the crowded Bus Station park in summer 2015—before the closure of the Hungarian border in September when the ‘Balkan Route’

shifted towards Croatia—the legacy of immigration from the Middle East during the non-aligned times intersected with the most recent and ongoing migration from (among others) Middle Eastern countries.

Of particular importance for the next section are specific patterns of racism²³ and Islamophobia which are embedded both in the Ottoman legacy and the more recent context of non-aligned Yugoslavia. When a number of forced migrants, mostly young men from such countries as Syria, Afghanistan or Iran, found themselves stranded in Serbia after the closure of the ‘Balkan Route’—supposedly a transit-country on their way to the EU—this had specific consequences and effects. Namely, this development revealed both an often pragmatic²⁴ and non-racialized/non-Islamophobic humanitarian approach on the part of the regime and civil society as well as a revival and (violent) right-wing populist exploitation of the gendered image of the ‘threatening Muslim Other’.

Based on this very brief sketch of the recent history and demographic transformations of migration in former Yugoslavia, Serbia in particular, the next section explores the most recent populist ‘takes’ on migration in Serbia. After a discussion of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the section focuses on the ‘refugee crisis’ along the ‘Balkan Route’ and its aftermath. The latter consists of people who have been stranded and others who continue to arrive in countries like Serbia, Macedonia or Bosnia both experiencing support from the state, civil society and citizens and also being subjected to marginalization, racism and violence by the police and ultra-right-wing groups and citizens.²⁵ However, before the two ‘ongoing events’ are examined more closely, the section comprises a few remarks on populism in Serbia and its instrumentalization of migration.

Populism and migration in the Western Balkans: zooming in on Serbia

In her recent analysis of ‘populism the Serbian way’ the Belgrade historian Dubravka Stojanović traces the history of populism in Serbia and ironically refers to Serbia as finally being the European ‘vanguard’ in at least one way.^{26 27} According to Stojanović, Vučić’s regime is the most recent version of a populist continuum in Serbia, which began with the populist socialism of Svetozar Marković in the 1870s and continued through the radicalism of Nikola Pašić into Tito’s real-socialism up to the regime of Slobodan Milošević. Both populisms à la Milošević and Vučić fit the above-mentioned understanding of populism as ‘thin ideology’ very well, since both political figures primarily use(d) nationalist sentiment to gain and stay in power, rather than pursuing consistent nationalist politics. Furthermore, they also fit Kalb’s analysis of mobilizing voters by accusing opposing political circles of being complicit with ‘conspiracies against the people’.²⁸ This plays out clearly in the case of Milošević’s demonization of, first, the ‘communist bureaucrats’ in the ‘anti-bureaucratic revolution’ in the 1980s, and then pro-Western civil society in the 1990s. Meanwhile, through his populist strategy Vučić aims to present himself both as a pro-European democratic politician and as the guardian of the nation.

In her analysis of the rise to power in Serbia of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), Theodora Vetta builds on Ivan Krastev’s poignant argument that ‘the Central European paradox is that the rise of populism is an outcome not of the failures, but of the successes of postcommunist liberalism’.²⁹ In other words, the ‘successful transition’ in Serbia—

consisting in the dismantling of the social system, the sell-off of state companies, mass-unemployment and continuing massive brain-drain—led to an accumulation of grievances towards the so-called democratic and anti-nationalist political forces. This is the context in which Vetta's analysis of the rise of the SRS from opposition to government shows that the party's success lies in a 'rather rational political choice of its supporters for whom, for different reasons, the SRS represented the only political option that they could identify with in the absence of a politically and institutionally organized Left'.³⁰

I would argue here that more or less the same can be said for the majority of the population supporting Vučić's populist politics in the novel form of the Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska Napredna Stranka, SNS, in power since 2012), through which Vučić (following Tomislav Nikolic, the party's founder) distinguished himself from his political 'cradle'—the Serbian Radical Party (and the ultra-right-wing nationalist Vojislav Šešelj)—to show a pro-European face and present himself as seemingly fit for government and as a legitimate negotiation partner for the EU. Applying Vetta's argument, the SNS can rely on considerable support within the population not necessarily because of actual ideological content—which is contradictory and scarce in comparison to the constant (self-victimizing and narcissistic) presence of the president in the media³¹—but primarily because of the lack of other options due to a fragmented opposition and the loss of legitimacy of the so-called pro-democratic forces. The most recent demonstrations against the corona curfew in July 2020, after it became apparent that the regime had faked the numbers and proclaimed 'victory over corona' in order to hold elections, showed this in the most blatant way. Scenes in which angry young people (chiefly men) yelled nationalist slogans, attacked the police and opposition politicians and raged against both the opposition and Vučić's populism laid bare an ideological void, which tragically, only found expression in senseless violence (rather than, e.g., in systematic struggle and peaceful mass protests against the authoritarian-populist regime).

In terms of migration Milošević and Vučić had different situations to 'manage' and exploit politically. As noted above, populism during Milošević first used the Serbian population in other parts of former Yugoslavia to support nationalist discourse and then subjected them to harsh forms of othering, neglect and resettlement. Furthermore, the classic work migrants and wealthy emigrants from Serbia were seen primarily as a financial and ideological back-up—a Ministry of Diaspora was even created—while the young by and large anti-nationalist emigrants were framed in the typical populist 'foreign collaborator' manner. Apart from inheriting this ambivalence in representing migrants, Vučić's populism had to come up with ways to politically exploit two radically new situations: the influx of mainly Muslim migrants in the course of the so-called 'refugee crisis' and the blocked and stigmatized mobilities caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The latter reveals novel and highly interesting patterns of populist discursive exploitation of migrants.

The diaspora as the main culprit in the pandemic

Soon after Vučić and his 'medical advisers' made jokes at a press conference in early March 2020 about the 'funniest virus in the history of mankind',³² the regime in Serbia drastically changed its tone as the number of COVID-19 cases in Serbia started rising.

More interestingly, a surprising culprit in the corona crisis in Serbia was immediately identified—the diaspora. As of March 2020, around 300,000 Serbian citizens returned to Serbia, exemplifying the global trend of reverse migration triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic.³³ Vučić first made his accusation regarding the diaspora in his typical self-victimizing pleading tone. At a press conference on March 14th he urged ‘people who live and work outside of the homeland (. . .) not to come home because this would be the end of us’.³⁴ In late March Vučić went as far as accusing them not only of ‘importing’ the virus by coming back, of not respecting the epidemiological measures, but even of coming back to Serbia ‘to get free medical treatment’.³⁵ Unsurprisingly this discourse provoked critical and emotional reactions even among those diaspora representatives who cultivate close relationships with Aleksandar Vučić’s populist regime and are cherished by him in return (see Note 9). Those in the diaspora who are critical of the current regime in Serbia openly blamed the president for having proclaimed ‘the witch-hunt for the Serbian diaspora’³⁶ while stressing the enormous significance of remittances as a major driver of the Serbian economy.³⁷

As I followed these developments—myself a ‘member of the diaspora’ in Austria and Switzerland—I found two aspects of this novel populist ‘variation’ on framing migration especially interesting. The first thing that caught my attention was the very terminology of the populist discourse about migration (and this goes beyond the COVID-19 context). That is, work migrants living abroad were never referred to as *migrants*, but rather as the *diaspora*, as ‘our people living abroad’. On the other hand, in the context of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’, the term *migrants* (Serb. *migranti*) is exclusively used for people moving or stranded along the ‘Balkan Route’ (who are not referred to as *refugees*, see below).

Even more interesting was the following question: who was Vučić actually blaming in his repeated lament? As I often discussed with friends and relatives across Europe, while we were all trapped in front of screens in our home offices, he could hardly mean ‘us’—the privileged ones in the sense of being work migrants and/or second-generation migrants who regularly work and live abroad (with citizenship or a long-term visa). Why would someone who has medical insurance in, for example, Austria go back to Serbia to get ‘free’ medical treatment in a country which, unfortunately, is medically much less well equipped—precisely because of the dismantling of the social and medical systems by neoliberal reforms and the ongoing huge brain-drain of medical and care workers. Rather, Vučić’s accusation could only refer to the thousands of irregularized migrants who navigate the Schengen regime to be able to survive and support their families in present-day Serbia. It is those migrants, precarious and irregularized workers who indeed have no medical insurance abroad, that rushed back to their country of citizenship, in which they have access to basic medical treatment.³⁸

Ironically, it was this migrant population that the populist regime appealed to as the elections in May 2020 were approaching. One could then observe how the image of the diaspora in the official management of the corona crisis radically transformed so as to secure the votes of citizens living abroad—especially those members of the diaspora who (still) have Serbian passports since they live and move as precarious and irregular migrants in Western Europe. It is precisely—as Vučić stated in a press conference on

May 18th—‘the young people who should not have to look for work in Norway, Germany, Switzerland or Austria’ for whom the state will allegedly create new employment opportunities.³⁹

The ‘Muslim other’ along the ‘Balkan Route’

The populist discursive exploitation of migration and migrants in the case of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ and its aftermath in Serbia features different but equally surprising manifestations and effects. As I have written elsewhere in more detail,⁴⁰ the regime’s populist exploitation of the ‘refugee crisis’ by and large did not mobilize classic and historically embedded Islamophobic images and arguments. Rather the Vučić regime used the image of migrants—without any further reference to gender, religious or ethnic affiliation and the reasons for forced mobility—for the positive self-representation of Serbia as well as on the international political stage in three ways.

Firstly, Serbian officials never tire of stressing the fact that Serbia neither closed nor employed violence at its borders in contrast to some EU countries, for example, Hungary or Croatia. Furthermore, Vučić used this particular line of argumentation to frame the image of Serbia as ‘actual Europe’⁴¹ in terms of not limiting the right to free movement and humanitarian aid. Indeed—as highlighted by Armina Galijas⁴² in a text based on her research among the 3,500–4,500 migrants who were initially “stranded” in Serbia after the official closure of the Balkan Route in March 2016—Serbia showed a “pragmatic and quite flexible administrative response to the refugees” situation.^{43 44} Later on, the initial humanitarian ‘style’ of dealing with the ‘refugee crisis’ shifted towards a security-based one.⁴⁵ However, the regime’s official discourse largely abstained from adopting a xenophobic and Islamophobic tone, which, as will be elaborated below, can be interpreted as an internal populist boundary-making strategy by the regime in relation to ultra-right-wing populism in Serbia.⁴⁶

The non-mobilization of regionally pronounced Islamophobic images was a useful self-styling strategy for the regime—since Vučić’s right-wing ideological origins continue to cast a ‘dark cloud’ over his international self-representation. This strategy can be seen as embedded in particular histories of Islam in the Balkans: not only the predominantly negatively connoted Ottoman legacy of migration and religious conversion (hegemonically framed as exclusively forced migration and conversion), but also, as mentioned above, the socialist legacy of the non-aligned movement, which brought young people from the Middle East—students from, for example, Egypt, Iraq or sub-Saharan countries—to Belgrade, Zagreb or Sarajevo. Today their children are Belgraders with, for example, Arabic as one of their two native languages, who act as translators and offer assistance in the parks to people temporarily staying in Serbia before moving on as well as to the newly arrived and/or stranded.

Secondly, the populist strategy of exploiting the events along the ‘Balkan Route’ went further than merely not employing Islamophobic images with regards to migrants. Namely, the ‘refugee crisis’ was used in terms of the regime’s representation of the Muslim minorities in Serbia. A prime example is the portrayal of local police forces in South Serbia—a region with an Albanian-Muslim majority population and a multi-ethnic police force project—as the Balkan Route’s ‘heroes with a gentle heart’. Serbian newspapers in summer 2015 were ‘flooded’ with the image of a policeman gently holding

a baby boy. Rexhep Arifi became the hero of the Balkan Route and was even given an award for humanity by the Serbian Interior Minister. However, the fact that he was honoured as a 'Serbian policeman' and not also as a member of the Muslim-Albanian minority sparked a wave of criticism.⁴⁷ This event on the 'Balkan Route' exemplifies the populist ambivalence towards the image of the (internal) Muslim as it played out in the course of the 'refugee crisis'. While hidden under the cloak of national humanitarian heroism, 'the Muslim other' can be lauded and exploited by a right-wing populist regime without reference to the image of ethnicized 'Muslim otherness' as potentially disloyal and thus threatening to the state.

Finally, the anti-Islamophobic self-image of the regime's populist strategy also served and still serves as a demarcation in relation to ultra-right-wing parties (such as Dveri⁴⁸) and groups (such as Levijatan⁴⁹). As mobility along the 'Balkan Route' continued after its official closure and people on the move were stranded in different parts of Serbia—often supported by the state and civil society—certain political actors started using an increasingly anti-migrant and Islamophobic tone in their critique of the government. In the manner of a classic populist conspiracy theory Dveri's leader, Boško Obradović, regularly criticizes Vučić's open border migration politics as being 'à la Soros and Merkel'.⁵⁰

Certain extreme right-wing groups in Serbia (as in other parts of former Yugoslavia where violence against migrants is increasingly common⁵¹) went a step further and even entered refugee camps while protesting against the presence of Muslim migrants in Serbia. *I don't want my girlfriend to be attacked by the migrants (...) I don't want my army and my people to protect the migrants; I don't want to give up Orthodox Christianity (Pravoslavlje) to Muslims*⁵² (translation by the author) yelled Filip, a young male member of Levijatan, while he was filming himself breaking into the refugee camp in the Serbian town of Obrenovac on 6 May 2020, whereupon he was arrested by the police.

The internal right-wing-populist dynamic shows how the image of the Muslim (male) migrant is used in different ways or not used at all in order to acquire political capital. Reacting critically to a right-wing anti-migrant and Islamophobic rhetoric serves the Vučić regime well in strengthening its superior European, humanitarian and non-nationalist as well as non-Islamophobic image. This is also the context of the following demarcation made by the Minister of Labour, Zoran Djordjević, regarding Obradović's anti-migrant and Islamophobic discourse:

Our policy is what our president Aleksandar Vučić described and that is the policy of freedom, equality and the fact that we are a country of free people. We know very well from past experience how it feels to be expelled, to be homeless, what it means to find yourself in such a situation and how much it means when someone offers you the hand of friendship. (translated by the author)⁵³

As exemplified by this statement, rather than differences (e.g., Islamophobic stereotypes), the official discourse in Serbia tends to highlight common experiences of forced migration. Apart from an understanding of ideological boundary-making strategies within the conservative right-wing political spectrum, this offers interesting insights into the populist utilization of recent history.

Concluding remarks: populism, floating signifiers of mobility and going beyond the East/West dichotomy

The way in which populism draws flexibly on different historical legacies—Djordjević's attempt to evoke a collective experience of expulsion being a good example—is grounded in specific emic/vernacular features of representing migration in Serbia (and former Yugoslavia in general). Thereby core terms relating to mobility, such as *migrant*, *refugee*, and *diaspora*, are being 'recomposed' in particular ways. Echoing Laclau, these terms figure as 'floating signifiers'⁵⁴ in the sense of being (un)fixed in different intersecting public-political, everyday and legal representations of historically embedded patterns and trajectories of mobility.⁵⁵

Interestingly, Djordjević's allusion to the common experience of forced migration is disconnected from vernacular references to people on the move or stranded along the 'Balkan Route'. Both in public and everyday discourses they are never referred to and acknowledged as 'refugees' (*izbeglice*), but instead as 'migrants' (*migranti*). In terms of the hegemonic discursive practice of 'parsing moral deservingness',⁵⁶ this term implies their transit stage, the 'voluntariness' of their moving-on and thus undeservingness to stay. The term *Izbeglice* ('refugees') (as well as *prognanici* ('expellees'), as mentioned above), on the other hand, implies a 'nationalized' collective experience, since it is reserved for Serbian refugees of the 1990s, suggesting the 'legitimacy' of their suffering. Finally, work migrants are never referred to as migrants but as the *diaspora*, regardless of whether they are members of long-established migrant populations or recent and precarious work migrants. The semiotics of (forced) mobility in the case of contemporary Serbia in a nutshell: The historically embedded discourse on migration playing out here is marked by a particular conceptual and normative-moralizing pattern in which the term *refugee* denotes the national population's legitimate suffering and thus the legitimacy to stay (even though in reality being by and large abandoned by the state); the term *migrant* denotes the '(Muslim) Other', who is represented with reference to common experiences of expulsion, but is seen as undeserving to stay and thus expected to eventually (voluntarily) move on; and finally, the term *diaspora* suggests that all work migrants—even those who are precarious, irregularized and constantly moving back and forth between Serbia and the EU—embody a stable national presence abroad rather than mobility-related challenges and vulnerabilities and brain-drain.

In spite of their apparent present-day 'fixedness', the conceptual images of the mobile figures (migrant, refugee, diaspora) are floating signifiers. Hence, they can be 'infused' with meaning in different and contradictory ways and disconnected from their legal content, depending on the particular aim and discursive employment to ground diverse claims: 'Europeanness', the threatening 'Muslim Other', national heroism or treason, humanitarianism, common experiences of expulsion, etc. As elaborated above, this 'floating' character is based on various historical transformations of mobility patterns and agents, which produce pronounced ambivalence and incoherence within populist framings of migration.

The 'floating' dimension of mobility terms also refers to mobile populations and subjects moving across and 'inhabiting' categories in ways that enhance their inconsistency. This is how the notion of diaspora includes both 'ideologically loyal' work

migrants, young anti-nationalist educational migrants and precarious irregularized migrants who feel betrayed by the populist regime. The populist strategies of instrumentalizing migrants thus navigate a delicate terrain and are marked by ambivalence and at times even imply—as the COVID-19 context exemplifies—paradoxical strategies. This is how the initial stigmatization of the diaspora as the main ‘culprit in the pandemic’ had to be swiftly corrected in the light of the upcoming elections. It is this diverse population that represents one of the pillars of the regime in terms of remittances, votes and social cohesion, since it literally embodies the ‘exportation’ of poverty and thus potential social unrest.

Equally an expression of ambivalence and paradoxicality in populist framings of mobile populations is the instance that in spite of strong historically embedded Islamophobia, in populist discourses Muslim migrants were represented in a much more favourable ‘humanitarian’ way than ‘national migrants’ scapegoated in the COVID-19 context were. Speaking with Brubaker, it can be argued that the ‘paradox of populism during the Pandemic’⁵⁷ is not to be read merely in terms of the discursive weakness and inconsistency of nationalist populism à la Vučić. Rather the ambivalence can be seen in terms of flexibility of the populist discursive framing of mobility and mobile populations, which figures as a potential strength. Namely, it enables this form of populism to distinguish itself both from the opposition (as not ‘national’ enough) and the ultra-rightist circles (as nationalist in the wrong way). Thus, unlike in most populist strategies in the Western European context, the case of Serbia shows how publicly abstaining from xenophobia and Islamophobia, at the same time as ‘denouncing’ the national (migrant) population, can figure as prime elements of a (successful) nationalist-populist discursive strategy. Thus, zooming in on populist ‘variations’ on mobility lends itself as a key analytical means of going ‘beyond East and West’⁵⁸ and common Balkanist framings of ethnic nationalism being more pronounced and ‘typical’ in ‘the Balkans’ and Eastern Europe. It is the comparative and transnationally/regionally oriented exploration of complex processes of governing and discursively framing ‘heightened’ phases of mobility which form a fruitful ‘empirical ground to create a new analytic framework that moves beyond over-simplified dichotomies’⁵⁹ of ‘locating’ Europe and its populisms.

Notes

1. The Republic of Serbian Krajina (RSK) was an autonomous and never internationally recognized state within the territory of Croatia (1991–1995, Capital Knin), whose establishment included the forced migration of parts of the local Croat population. On August 5th, 1995 in the course of the military operation ‘Oluja’ (Storm) the Croatian army expelled the population (about 250,000 forced migrants) of the RSK and committed numerous war crimes, only two of which have resulted in verdicts so far. Only in 2020, the yearly August 5th festivities in Knin (‘Day of Croatian Defenders’) included honouring some of the victims of the war crimes committed by the Croatian (para)military (see: <https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/vazno/19851/>).
2. S. M. Holmes and H. Castaneda, ‘Representing the “European Refugee Crisis” in Germany and Beyond: Deservingness and Difference, Life and Death’, *American Anthropologist*, 43(1), 2016, pp. 12–24, p. 16.
3. In this text, I rely strongly on my fieldwork in Belgrade during different phases of the ‘refugee crisis’ along the ‘Balkan Route’ in 2015 and 2016, results of which have been published in J. Tošić, ‘From a “Transit Route” to the “Backyard of Europe”? Tracing the

- Past, Present, and Future of the Balkan Route', in G. Fartacek and S. Binder (eds), *Facetten von Flucht aus dem Nahen und Mittleren Osten*, Facultas Universitätsverlag, 2017, pp. 150–166.
4. C. Mudde and C. R. Kaltwasser, *Populism. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2017.
 5. Ibid., p. 6.
 6. E. Laclau, 'Warum Populismus', *Zeitschrift Luxemburg*, 18(1), 2014. p. 3.
 7. A. Berger, A. Lems and C. Moderbacher, *Anthropological Engagements with the far Right*. EASA Network for Ethnographic Theory, 2020 (<https://networkofethnographictheory.wordpress.com/anthropological-engagements-with-the-far-right/>).
 8. V. Stolcke, 'Talking Culture: New Boundaries, New Rhetorics of Exclusion in Europe', *Current Anthropology*, 36(1), 1995, pp. 1–24.
 9. D. R. Holmes, *Integral Europe*. Princeton University Press, 2000.
 10. A. Gingrich and M. Banks, *Neo-Nationalism in Europe and Beyond*, Berghahn, 2006.
 11. D. Kalb, 'Conversations with a Polish Populist: Tracing Hidden Histories of Globalization, Class, and Dispossession in Postsocialism (and Beyond)', *American Ethnologist*, 36(2), 2009.
 12. C. Hann, 'Overheated Underdogs: Civilizational Analysis and Migration on the Danube-Tisza Interfluvium', *History & Anthropology*, 27(5), 2016.
 13. T. Vetta, "'Nationalism Is Back!' Radikali and Privatization in Serbia', in D. Kalb and G. Halmai (eds), *Headlines of Nation, Subtexts of Class: Working-Class Populism and the Return of the Repressed in Neoliberal Europe*, Berghahn, 2011, pp. 37–57.
 14. D. Kalb, 'Introduction', in D. Kalb and G. Halmai (eds), *Headlines of Nation, Subtexts of Class: Working-Class Populism and the Return of the Repressed in Neoliberal Europe*. Berghahn, 2011, pp. 1–37.
 15. Ibid, p. 19.
 16. This primarily refers to the majority of migrants who found their way to German-speaking countries.
 17. A prime example here were primarily pro-Milošević protests in Vienna against the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999.
 18. They were assigned the status of 'expellees' (prognanici) (for more see J. Tošić, "'I Am a Citizen of the United Nations": Krajina-Serbs After the Exodus—A Case Study of Resistance', in S. Binder and J. Tošić (eds), *Refugee Studies and Politics: Human and Research Perspectives*. WUV, 2002, pp. 89–111).
 19. Ibid.
 20. J. Tošić, 'From a "Transit Route" to the "Backyard of Europe"? Tracing the Past, Present, and Future of the Balkan Route', in G. Fartacek and S. Binder (eds), *Facetten von Flucht aus dem Nahen und Mittleren Osten*. Facultas Universitätsverlag, 2017, pp. 150–166.
 21. Speaking with N. El-Sharawi and R. Maple, 'Movements Upon Movements: Refugee and Activist Struggles to Open the Balkan Route to Europe', *History and Anthropology*, 30(1), 2019, pp. 91–112., this can be seen as an example of migration and activism—conceived as two different interrelated kinds of 'movements'—being 'integral to the dynamics of the Route' (Ibid., p. 91).
 22. The Non-Aligned Movement was founded in 1961 (Belgrade Conference) on the initiative of Josip Broz Tito of Yugoslavia, Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, Jawaharlal Nehru of India, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, and Sukarno of Indonesia. Its goal was to form a global political force beyond Cold War divisions in support of national self-determination against all forms of colonialism and imperialism. (see also: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Non-Aligned-Movement>).
 23. See also: C. Baker, *Race and the Yugoslav Region: Postsocialist, Post-Conflict, Postcolonial?* Manchester University Press, 2018. and P. Rexhepi, 'Arab Others at European Borders: Racializing Religion and Refugees along the Balkan Route', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 41(12), 2018, pp. 2215–2234. DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2017.1415455.

24. A. Galijas, 'Permanently in Transit: Middle Eastern Migrants and Refugees in Serbia', *Südosteuropa*, 67(1), 2019. pp. 75–109.
25. For more see, e.g., A. Hromadžić, 'Uninvited Citizens: Violence, Spatiality and Urban Ruination in Postwar and Postsocialist Bosnia and Herzegovina', *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal*, 4(2–3), 2019, pp. 114–136. DOI: 10.1080/23,802,014.2019.1646615 and Rexhepi 2018.
26. D. Stojanovic, *Populism the Serbian Way*, Pescanik, 2017, p. 7.
27. Along the same lines one could add Serbia's fast pace of COVID-19 vaccination as another curious instance of it being the European vanguard. At the time of writing, Serbia was among the countries in Europe that have provided the highest number of vaccines to their own populations as well as those of neighbouring countries, a situation referred to as 'vaccine tourism'. (see e.g., <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/europe/vaccine-tourists-welcome-as-some-serbians-say-no-thanks-to-jabs?fbclid=IwAR3FGtAQkiwWyjinhk8XO5z5Dx0iODsSx3pp5XVzOmnjbABpPxD4tyjyaHU>).
28. Kalb, 'Introduction', op. cit., p. 6.
29. Ivan Krastev in Vetta T. 2011, p. 45.
30. Ibid.
31. See also S. M. Jovanović, "You're Simply the Best': Communicating Power and Victimhood in Support of President Aleksandar Vučić in the Serbian Dailies *Alo!* and *Informer*", *Journal of Media, Research*, 11(2,31), 2018, pp. 22–42.
32. D. Šantić and M. Antić, 'Serbia in the Time of COVID-19: Between 'Corona Diplomacy', Tough Measures and Migration Management', *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 61(4–5), 546–558, p. 550.
33. Ibid., p. 554.
34. As reported by Deutsche Welle: <https://www.dw.com/bs/vu%C4%8Di%C4%87ev-menad%C5%BEment-straha/a-52898973>.
35. Ibid., and as also reported by N1: <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a602886/Obrt-za-dijasporu-od-krivca-za-sirenje-zaraze-do-ostajte-ovde.html>.
36. <https://www.koreni.rs/vucicu-sram-te-bilo-pokrenuo-si-lov-na-srpsku-dijasporu/>.
37. See also Šantić, D. and Antić, D. 2020, p. 554.
38. See also Šantić, D. and Antić, D. 2020.
39. As reported by N1: <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a602886/Obrt-za-dijasporu-od-krivca-za-sirenje-zaraze-do-ostajte-ovde.html>.
40. Tošić, 'From a "Transit Route" to the "Backyard of Europe"?' op. cit.
41. Ibid.
42. Galijas, A. 2017.
43. Galijas, 'Permanently in Transit', op. cit., p. 75.
44. Even though it was also apparent that this attitude was strongly related to the migrants' clear intention to leave Serbia as soon as they could (Galijas 2019, p. 75).
45. For more, see M. Bobić and D. Santić, 'Forced Migrations and Externalization of European Union Border Control: Serbia on the Balkan Migration Route', *International Migration*, 58(3), 2019, DOI: 10.1111/imig.12622.
46. See also J. Greenberg and I. Spasić, 'Beyond East and West: Solidarity Politics and the Absent/Present State in the Balkans', *Slavic Review*, 76(2), 2017, pp. 315–326.
47. For more see Tošić, 'From a "Transit Route" to the "Backyard of Europe"?' op. cit.
48. Dveri is a right-wing clerical-nationalist movement and later political party (established 2010) (for more see also J. Bakic, *Right-Wing Extremism in Serbia*. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2013.)
49. Levijatan is a far-right ultra-nationalist political party (established 2020), which started out as a registered animal protection organization in 2015. It has been known for anti-Roma and anti-migrant actions (see also the recent essay by the Michael Colborne at: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2020/06/18/levijatan-serbian-animal-rights-vigilantes-go-to-the-polls/>).
50. <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/rasizam-i-ksenofobija-bosko-obradovic-huska-protiv-migranata-trazi-ukidanje/24n1ksk>.
51. See e.g., the Facebook group 'Transbalkanska Solidarnost'.

52. The video posted officially on Twitter can be seen at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=STb4kGJlxLY>.
53. <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/fasisticka-izjava-o-migrantima-djordevic-srbija-pruza-ruku-svima-i-tako-ce-bit-i/7k17g0n>.
54. E. Laclau, 'Constructing Universalism', in E. Laclau, J. Butler and S. Zizek (eds), *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, Verso, 2000, p. 305.
55. For a systematic diachronic overview of migration-related concepts in Serbia, see M. Stojic Mitrovic, 'Izbeglice (Refugees), Azilanti (Asylum Seekers) and Ilegalni Migranti (Illegal Migrants) in Administrative and Public Discourse in Serbia: An Overview of Concepts in a Diachronic Perspective', *Narodna umjetnost*, 57(2), 2020–12-01, pp. 147–167.
56. Holmes and Castaneda, 'Representing the "European Refugee Crisis" in Germany and Beyond', op. cit., p. 16.
57. R. Brubaker, 'Paradoxes of Populism during the Pandemic', *Thesis*, 11, 2020, pp. 1–15.
58. Greenberg and Spasić, 'Beyond East and West', op. cit.
59. Ibid., p. 315.

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