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From a Transit Route to the "Backyard of Europe"? Tracing the Past, Present and Future of the "Balkan Route"

Having built up throughout the first half of the year, in the summer of 2015 the numbers of refugees crossing the Balkans in order to reach countries such as – in the main – Germany, the United Kingdom or Sweden climaxed and a "European refugee crisis" was proclaimed. Huge numbers of people were crossing the Greek, Macedonian, Romanian, Bulgarian, Serbian, Hungarian and, somewhat later, Croatian and Slovenian borders. As I followed this "crisis" in diverse media and on an everyday basis in the Serbian capital Belgrade – whose central Bus and Railway Station area became a huge transit and humanitarian zone – what I found most striking was not the sheer number of people on the move determined to reach their destinations; the complex mixture of reactions among the local population to help, profit or reject; or the often ambivalent and abruptly changing state policies. Rather, one of the most remarkable and surprising aspects of the "refugee crisis" was that it seemed to have caught both western European countries and the Balkan states "by surprise". Even though people have been crossing, trying to cross and dying in the Mediterranean for years and the refugee situation in Turkey, Jordan or Lebanon[1] was continuously worsening (due to underfunded international aid, lack of work and education possibilities etc.),[2] in most of the European media reports and politicians' statements the "refugee crisis" had an aura of a sudden present – an event out of history, which has to be dealt with as soon as possible in order not to alter the (European) future.

By focusing on a section of the refugee trajectory towards west European countries in this paper I want to explore and reflect upon the temporal logic and image of the "refugee crisis" in general and the "Balkan Route" in particular. My main argument is that in order to capture the complexity and impact of the ongoing immigration to (eastern and south-eastern) Europe, a more systematic consideration of history and temporality in general is of great importance.

1_According to Amnesty International in February 2015 4.5 million refugees from Syria were hosted by only five countries: Turkey (2.5 Million), Lebanon (1.1 Million), Jordan (635,324), Iraq (245,022) and Egypt (117,658) (see: https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/02/syrias-refugee-crisis-in-numbers/) (last access on November 8th 2016).

2_For a discussion of core factors and the timing of the European "refugee crisis" in summer 2015 see: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/09/18/8-reasons-why-europes-refugee-crisis-is-happening-now/ (last access on October 29th 2016).

I will first examine what became the dominant representation of the "refugee crisis" along the "Balkan Route" in media reports during summer 2015 (and to a lesser extent to date), which comprised a "chronology" of high numbers of people moving towards western Europe encountering changing border regimes along their way. In order to show that a chronological representation – even though it reveals the relation among states in south-eastern Europe as well as with EU – does not provide for a more substantial understanding of what was (and is still is) going on along the "Balkan Route", secondly, I will contextualise this part of the flight trajectory in a deeper temporal and ideological horizon. I will argue that it is crucial to look at the legacy of (forced) migration in the Balkans in order to understand the ways in which refugees were encountered along their journey both by citizens and states. Furthermore, I will discuss how media coverage and the statements of experts and politicians on the "Balkan Route" both in western and south-eastern European countries reveal well-known elements of what Maria Todorova (2009) aptly referred to as the discourse of Balkanism: here the Balkans appear either as a space of "tolerance" and "welcoming culture" or a space of exclusion and violence; and furthermore as an eternal "transit zone", a place not worth settling in. I will conclude the text with ethnographic insights from Belgrade during summer 2015.

A Brief Chronology of the "Balkan Route"

While the initial responses in the Balkans ranged from chaos, through inadequate treatment of refugees (up to them facing physical violence) to sheer ignorance, throughout July 2015 the Balkan states seem to have adapted to the steady flow of forced migrants passing through their territories. The activities of the security forces and volunteers, however, were by and large limited to letting people pass through at the very least and providing them with basic humanitarian help in terms of water, food, clothes, medical supplies and information relevant for moving on at the most. It was an extremely hot summer and people often slept in the open, next to border crossings or bus and railway stations.

"Letting people pass through" or "helping them on their way" were common descriptions of what was going on in Belgrade during Summer 2015 by my interlocutors, the local media and politicians. These blended into the dominant way the "Balkan Route" was framed by west European media, refugees themselves and governments in the Balkans: the Balkans were primarily seen as a transit route/zone. For the politicians this Balkanist framing of their countries as merely points on a transit route was also very convenient since it legitimised their calls for assistance and their inability to cope with the "refugee crisis" on their own.

However, the framing of the "Balkan Route" as a transit zone entered – one could even say – a crisis of its own when the rhetoric and border regimes of

west European countries started changing. Through increased control and selectiveness at EU-borders the Balkans were thus indeed threatened with becoming the "backyard of Europe", which impacted the way states in the Balkans regulated their borders.

The turning point in the wake of these developments was Hungary more heavily guarding and finally fencing its border with Serbia in September 2015. Border violence and conflicts accompanied this process. The shocking scenes of people being driven away from the Hungarian–Serbian border by the Hungarian police throwing tear gas went viral, provoking an outcry about how in the 21st century such "uncivilised" treatment of people in need could be possible in Europe. Although the example of Hungary was in stark contrast to Angela Merkel's pioneering rhetoric and politics of the *Willkommenskultur*, on a macro political economic scale these two strongly differing European reactions to the "refugee crisis" coexisted. While Merkel's inclusive rhetoric and open-door policy has gradually come to face increasing criticism, Hungary's restrictive border and migration regime has more recently started to gain greater "understanding" in Europe – indeed beyond the more extreme right-wing end of the political spectrum and especially in light of the contested issue of "just" distribution. One of what are arguably the most illustrative recent manifestations of this discursive shift is the comment by the Austrian Foreign Minister, Sebastian Kurz, on the failed, yet unambiguous Hungarian migrant quota referendum.[3] While criticizing the condemnation that the migration policy of the national-conservative Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban very often faces in Europe, Kurz pointed out "the danger when some states in the European Union are creating the impression of being morally superior to other member states".[4]

The closure of the Hungarian border in September 2015 led to the Balkan Route shifting away from Hungary and across Croatia. This shift of the route resulted in conflicts among Balkan states, due to realistic fears that a high number of refugees would be stranded in their territory, with the Balkans indeed becoming "the backyard of Europe".

The conflict between Serbia and Croatia in September 2015 is a case in point. Croatia accused Serbia of "carting" the refugees from the Macedonian–Serbian border directly to Croatia and pushing them into Croatian territory. The conflict over refugees in turn had economic consequences since Croatia blocked the passage of all Serbian vans carrying diverse export/import goods.

3_The referendum, which took place on October 2nd 2016, failed due to a low turn-out (around 44%). In it, 98,36% voted "No" to the leading referendum question: Do you want to allow the European Union to mandate the resettlement of non-Hungarian citizens to Hungary without the approval of the National Assembly? (http://dailynewshungary.com/orban-government-to-call-referendum-on-eu-migrant-quotas/) (last access on October 29th 2016).
4_Translated and taken from http://orf.at/stories/2360413/ (last access on November 8th 2016).

However, the closure of the Hungarian border in September 2015 and the increasingly restrictive border regimes of other EU countries eventually prompted governments in the Balkan states to form new alliances and ask for a "common European solution". This solution has, by and large, turned out to be border closure. The "Balkan Conference" held in Vienna on 24 February 2016 was one of the steps in this direction. This extemporaneous meeting was organised by Austria and hosted state representatives from Albania, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia. The aim was to discuss – as Austrian Ministers Johanna Mikl-Leitner and Sebastian Kurz described it – how to "manage migration together", which, however, primarily turned out to mean limiting the influx of refugees to the EU through a more restrictive border regime in the Balkans. The first Balkan meeting represented the beginning of the end of the – to use Mikl-Leitner's terms – "Durchwinken" ("waving-through")[5] and was followed by the closure of the Balkan Route in March 2016. This development primarily affected the only country in the region that was excluded from the Balkan conference but which nevertheless hosted the highest number of refugees "stranded" on their way to Western Europe: Greece. Protection of external borders, the contested EU–Turkey "deal"[6], upper limit quotas, selection based on the country of origin[7] and the ongoing debate on a "just" distribution of refugees among member states[8] have dominated European refugee crisis discourse and practice up to the present day. After the second meeting of the "Balkan Route Leaders"[9] (this time including Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras) in Vienna in late September 2016, which aimed to discuss these developments, Angela Merkel argued for the EU–Turkey deal as the only long-term solution and openly criticised the closure of the Balkan Route in March 2016. Even though the latter has lowered the number of forced

5_See e.g. http://diepresse.com/home/politik/aussenpolitik/4941250/MiklLeitner-auf-CNN_Anfang-vom-Ende-des-Durchwinkens (last access on October 25th 2016).
6_The Agreement (March 18th 2015) between the 28 EU heads of state and the Turkish government implied the return of refugees from Greece to Turkey (from which those considered eligible for asylum would be received in the EU) in return for an acceleration of the visa liberalisation for Turkish nationals, and increasing financial support for coping with the huge refugee population.
7_The situation along the "Balkan Route" has been strongly affected by Europe closing its Borders to Afghan nationals, who have been denied entry to Macedonia since February 2016 and had to remain in Greece.
8_The EU Relocation Programme, which was established in September 2015 and which should lead to the relocation of 160,000 people from Italy and Greece to other EU Member States by September 2017, has so far had disappointing results. As of March 2016 only 600 of the planned 160,000 people had been relocated (see https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/04/eu-refugee-relocation-scheme-inadequate-will-continue-to-fail) (last access on October 25th 2016).
9_See http://www.euronews.com/2016/09/24/balkan-route-leaders-meet-in-vienna-to-tackle-migration-crisis

migrants entering the EU, it has not reduced the number of people entering Greece. While the human march along the Balkan Route in summer 2015 was omnipresent in the media on a global scale, the present-day reality of many people still being stranded as well as continuously arriving in the Balkans, often escapes media attention.[10]

Temporal-Ideological Dimensions of the "Balkan Route"

In temporal terms the condition of "being stranded" – either in a camp near a border or in a country that was supposed to be merely a "station" on one's way – can be conceptualised as inhabiting a present that is at the same time temporary and indefinite, marked by the simultaneity of "stuckedness"[11] and anticipated movement. The following report on the situation in Idomeni – the Greek border town that became the European epitome (along with, e.g., Calais) of inhabiting a closed border – can serve not only as a good illustration of the heightening situation in Greece after Afghan nationals were denied entry to Macedonia in February 2016, but, moreover, of the complexity of social processes of mobility, power and resistance while "being stuck" at a closed border.

> With as many as three ferries a day docking at the mainland from the Aegean islands, each with up to 2,000 refugees on board, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras warned that his country was being turned into a 'cemetery of souls'. Around Idomeni (Greek–Macedonian border), the police began to round up Afghan nationals, putting them on buses and transporting them to already overflowing immigration camps. [...] At a motorway petrol station in the village of Polykastro, 20km from the Macedonian border, a group of nearly 200 Afghans held a sit-down protest against the prospect of being returned to Athens. The Greek police responded forcibly, shoving, kicking and attempting to drag families on to the bus. One officer, looking up at a few European journalists present, bellowed: 'These are your refugees!'[12]

10_Around Idomeni at the Greek–Macedonian border there were 10,000–12,000 (see http://www.helprefugees.org.uk/news/idomeni-whos-helping-update-latest-situation/). At the Macedonian–Serbian border hundreds of people were stranded in March 2016 (see http://www.dw.com/en/hundreds-of-refugees-stranded-on-macedonian-serbian-border/a-19113466). At Tabakovce at the Serbian–Hungarian border hundreds of people repeatedly tried to cross the border during the summer of 2016 (see http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/07/hundreds-refugees-march-serbia-hungary-border-160724133938553.html) (last access to the internet sites listed in the footnote October 21st 2016).
11_For an elaborated exploration of "stuckedness" see e.g. Hage (2009).
12_http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/02/europe-closing-borders-afghans-160225151702251.html (last access on October 31st 2016).

Apart from the dramatic situation on the Balkan Route in early 2016 – which escalated to the point where people broke through the wire fence and the Macedonian police employed tear gas – this almost ethnographic media report brings up a crucial and often implicit aspect of the "refugee crisis". The Greek officer's remark on "ownership" of the "refugee crisis" raises the issue of political, economic and historical configurations and responsibilities. Recent anthropological and other critical contributions that take into account the interrelation between colonial legacies and neo-imperial and neoliberal presents have also reflected on this issue.

Precisely the temporal-ideological dimension of the ongoing migratory quest to certain European countries are occluded by the dominant temporal framing in terms of "crisis", which establishes the image of a heated present of emergency, which has to be acted upon for the sake of the future. As Sabine Strasser (2015) aptly points out, the "crisis effect" consists of drawing our attention away from particular regimes and redistributions of power and intervention (humanitarian, economic or military).

Furthermore, the narrow and ahistorical framing of the "refugee crisis" as a sudden event without history masks legacies of colonial rule and exploitation – or speaking in Slavoj Žižek's terms (2016) – "the political economy of refugees". Besides pointing out the "arbitrary borders drawn after the First World War by the UK and France, which thereby created a series of 'artificial' states" (2016: 41), Žižek highlights the fact that the highest number of refugees comes from "failed states" (such as Syria, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Congo or Eritrea) where state disintegration and suspension of sovereignty is not a merely "local phenomenon", but rather a "result of international politics and economy; and in some cases, as in Libya or Iraq, of direct western intervention" (Žižek 2016: 41).

An anthropologist who has recently looked at the "refugee crisis" from a post-colonial temporal-ideological perspective is Ghassan Hage (2016). In his attempt to interpret the "panic" that Europe is going to be "overrun" by refugees – by and large essentialised and homogenised as "Muslims" – Hage explores the notion of "reverse colonization" and highlights how "western fears" are embedded in the legacy of colonial rule:

> These fears have a long history. A feeling of being besieged by the very people whom one is actually colonizing is, paradoxically, part and parcel of the history of colonialism. [...] It is perhaps not so surprising to see the theme of 'reverse colonization' reemerging at the very time when we are witnessing an intensification of Western colonial military interventionism in the Middle East. (Hage 2016: 39)

But what can we say against this background about the way people along the "Balkan Route" conceive(d) their role and responsibility within the "refugee

crisis"? Based on my exploratory fieldwork in the summer of 2015 I would argue that many people in the Balkans – regardless of their attitude towards refugees – did not perceive the people on the move that they encountered as "their" refugees or a "late effect" of "their" history. In other words, the analysis of processes and imaginaries along the "Balkan Route" shows that the image of Europe seen through the lens of the "refugee crisis" as "reverse colonisation" is far too narrow and does not consider diverse and complex European histories – in this particular case its south-eastern parts.

Rather the Balkans themselves represent former regions – and one could argue colonies[13] – of the Ottoman and the Habsburg (and later Austro-Hungarian) Empires. In that sense the "reverse colonization" image plays out in crucially different ways in the case of the south-eastern (and eastern) parts of Europe. Thus, many people in the Balkans – where there is an ongoing debate around who is "actually" European and who rather embodies the "Balkans" or the "Orient" – relate to the colonial drawing of borders and the related present-day turmoil in the Middle East as a history they were not an active part of – or at least part of in a radically different way from (former) European colonial powers.

Here, I would suggest, a specific temporal insight into the "Balkan Route" might be useful. In order to more adequately analyse which historical registers people in the Balkans potentially draw from when relating to the "refugee crisis" it is of particular importance to take into account migration legacies.

Legacies of (Forced) Migration

People fleeing and crossing the Balkans not only traverse a geographical and political space of different landscapes and borders. They also cross a historical space framed by different patterns of migration, which essentially impact on the way states and their diverse citizens approach people during their flight.

The enormous complexity of (forced) migratory legacies in the Balkans has led some historians to choose precisely migration as the main lens through which to explore the history of this part of Europe. The historian Isa Blumi (2013), for example, has recently published a study on late Ottoman refugees in the Balkans in which he deconstructs the hegemonic ethnocentric and teleological image of refugees as the victims of the inevitable nation-state having replaced the imperial order in the Middle East and Europe. His study shows that refugees were indeed not – as they are usually portrayed – passive objects, but rather agents of history, who often subverted and manipulated nation-state ideology.

13_According to Todorova the Balkans are more adequately understood as "semi-colonial" since: "they are Europe" (even though historically figuring its periphery/province); and the "sensibility of victimization is much less acute" related to an ever given "consciousness of a certain degree of autonomy" (see Todorova 2009: 16–17).

Another example is the work by the German historian Holm Sundhausen (2006), who sees the history of South-eastern Europe precisely in terms of a history of migration.

In order to understand the dynamics along the "Balkan Route", I will highlight three existing legacies and one non-existent migratory legacy I find particularly significant. The first legacy of significance for exploring the "Balkan Route" in a broader temporal horizon is most commonly referred to as the "unmixing of the late Ottoman frontiers" (e.g. Brubaker 1996). This metaphoric – and euphemistic – expression actually refers to the often violent expulsion of the Balkan Muslims in the final decades of the Ottoman Empire. Without going into the detail of this complex and often neglected part of south-east European history,[14] this legacy impacts on the present and is related to particular patterns of Islamophobia. Especially in those areas of the Balkans that once were part of the Ottoman Empire and today are populated by a Christian majority – such as Bulgaria or Serbia – the image of the "Muslim" is related to the historical negative image of the "Turk", which represents the ultimate "Oriental other" "overrunning", "conquering" and colonizing the "Christian lands" (see also Gingrich 1998; Jezernik 2010). During my stay in Belgrade in summer 2015 I once again witnessed a number of situations where this image manifested itself. One of those was when during a private dinner at a friend's house, a 45-year-old biochemist – with a pro-European and anti-nationalist habitus – commented on the "refugee crisis" by saying: "The Muslims will overrun us and conquer Europe, after we had managed to finally expel the Turks." This quote not only (unfortunately) illustrates the easy coexistence of higher education, a political attitude counting as "progressive" (in the context of the young urban middle class in Belgrade) and an unreflective "Othering" and essentialisation of Muslims based on a misplaced historical reference.[15] Furthermore, related to Hage's explorations of the representational and historical dimension of the "refugee crisis" in Europe, the interesting point is that the latter – rather than appearing as "reverse colonisation" – here seems to be perceived more in terms of "re-colonisation".

The second legacy of migration I would like to point out as relevant refers to the second half of the 20th century. More precisely, it relates to former Yugoslavia and its crucial role within the Non-Aligned Movement,[16] a movement on a global

14_Apart from e.g. Isa Blumi's work (2013), the work by the anthropologist Dawn Chatty (2010) is of significance here.

15_Since the main connection between the "refugee crisis" and the Ottoman Empire is the fact that the present-day conflicts people are fleeing can be seen as heavily impacted by the colonial drawing of borders in the Middle East (and beyond) after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire (see also Žižek 2016).

16_After an initial meeting in Bandung, Indonesia (1955), and Brijuni, Yugoslavia (1956), the Movement of the Non-Aligned was founded in Belgrade, Yugoslavia in 1961.

scale, which not only advocated for nuclear disarmament and the reduction of Cold War tensions, but, moreover, opposed "colonialism, neo-colonialism, imperialism and racism" (Gupta 1992: 66). During this period, former Yugoslavia was a migratory destination for many students from the Middle East and Africa. It was a time in which widespread Islamophobia and Racism were masked by – and to some extent transformed into – a proud cosmopolitanism but also of being a country embodying a third way between totalitarian, real socialism and capitalism, a country where many different people indeed wanted to live. It thus comes as no surprise that during Tito-Yugoslavia many students from Africa and the Middle East came to study at one of the Yugoslav universities and not uncommonly settled in this multi-ethnic federal state. It is precisely their children I encountered as volunteers and translators walking the Bus and Railway Station Parks and providing assistance to people on the move in their mother tongue.

The third legacy I would like to identify as relevant is the dissolution of former Yugoslavia. Between 1990 and 1995 and later in 1999, due to violent conflicts in former Yugoslavia, hundreds of thousands of people had to flee to the neighbouring countries. Very often those people were indeed encountered with scepticism, reservation and often even with animosity. In Serbia, for example – just as in August 1995 when around 220,000[17] members of the Serbian minority were brutally expelled by the Croatian army and came to Serbia – they were not welcome. Those without relatives to help them received little assistance from the state, and they were often othered as "Croats" due to their dialect, exploited on the labour market and strategically resettled (primarily to Kosovo), etc. This legacy indeed was very much present during the summer of 2015. In many conversations I heard Belgraders lamenting the fact that Serbian refugees from Croatia were not treated adequately in 1995 and they saw the "refugee crisis" as an opportunity to do it better this time. Furthermore, many Belgraders – once refugees themselves – expressed solidarity through the shared experience of forced migration.

The fourth aspect of migratory legacy actually represents an absence of a legacy – namely the lack of a functioning asylum system. Due to the economic downturn and violent conflicts in the Balkans after the collapse of real socialism, this part of Europe had become primarily a space of emigration. The hundreds of thousands of refugees who fled Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo to Serbia, Croatia and Albania were by and large considered to be Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Due to the increased forced migration in the Mediterranean the Serbian asylum system – which existed merely in principle – was confronted with a rising number

17_See http://www.veritas.org.rs/srpske-zrtve-rata-i-poraca-na-podrucju-hrvatske-i-bivse-rsk-1990-1998-godine/mape-pravaca-kretanja-izbjeglickih-kolona-u-hrvatskoj-akciji-oluja/ (last access on October 25th 2016).

of asylum-seekers: in 2014 there were three times as many asylum-seekers in Serbia (16,490) than in the previous year.[18] Although an overwhelming number of people who had walked the Balkan Route did not want to apply for asylum in Serbia (see e.g. Belgrade Centre for Human Rights 2016), the few of them who did encountered a poorly functioning asylum system.

> One still cannot qualify the asylum system in Serbia as efficient or the situation in this area as satisfactory. Although the number of asylum seekers has been growing continuously, the capacities of the relevant authorities have not been raised. The Asylum Act remains unchanged [...] Of the 28.295 people who have expressed the intention to seek asylum in Serbia since 2008 (when the Asylum Act came into force), only six have been granted refugee status and twelve subsidiary protection. [...] The Serbian asylum procedure is still inefficient and unfair. There is no plan for the integration of people granted asylum in Serbia's society. This is one of the reasons why many asylum seekers do not perceive Serbia as a country of refuge, but only as a country in which they will stay temporarily, until they organise their journey to one of the EU member states. (Belgrade Centre for Human Rights 2015: 14)

Balkanism and Nesting Orientalism along the "Balkan Route"

The well-known metaphor of the Balkans being the "powder keg" of Europe because they represent a region inhabited by people entangled in "ancient hatreds" suggests that the Balkans are a place that could "explode" any time. This stereotype has pervaded political and media representations throughout the refugee crisis. As reported in *Die Zeit*[19] in November 2015, Angela Merkel explained her initiative for a Conference on the Balkan Route by stating that she did not want military tensions to recur there and that it would happen faster than one could assume that a dispute turns into palpability.[20] Another example from *Die Zeit* – a blog on the "refugee crisis" from October 2015 titled "The Disintegration Starts in the Balkans" – reads like an introductory example of the Balkanism discourse:

18_See: http://www.bgcentar.org.rs/bgcentar/eng-lat/right-asylum-republic-serbia-2014/ (last access on October 25th 2016).

19_The following examples from Die Zeit were pointed out to me by Camilla Mitterberger in her outstanding seminar paper for the course on "Re-Imagining the Balkans. Anthropological Inquiries into Diversity, Borders and Migration" I gave at the University of Vienna in the summer term 2015.

20_http://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2015-11/fluechtlinge-oesterreich-deutschland-zaunbau-angela-merkel-balkanstaaten (last access October 26th 2016).

> When the Balkans get loud and hectic, the rest of Europe should be vigilant. The region is often referred to as the backyard of Europe. At the same time, it was always a stage, where European tragedies originated. It was the assassination in Sarajevo that caused WWI.[21]

The "refugee crisis" along the "Balkan Route", however, also featured the other side of the "Balkanist coin": the image of the Balkans as the ultimate space of diversity and tolerance (e.g. Tošić 2009). As mentioned above, this image was very convenient for Serbian politicians in framing their country as "truly European", since it was keeping its borders open unlike some EU states (such as Hungary). As I followed diverse European media throughout the summer, what I found even more irritating than formerly ultra-right politicians styling themselves as true Europeans based on their policy of "waving through" people in need was the ubiquitous astonishment at the outstanding "helpfulness" and "humanitarian attitude" of the "Serbs". "Wait, the Serbs are Now the Good Guys?" read the main title of a text in the online political analytic journal *Politico* dealing with the transformation of Serbia's international image in the course of the "refugee crisis".[22] The picture of a policeman in south Serbia tenderly holding a baby, taken and posted on Twitter by BBC Radio 4 journalist Menween Rana was a "milestone" in this regard (see Image below).

A Syrian baby boy in the arms of a Serbian policeman[23]

21_Translated and taken from http://blog.zeit.de/ladurnerulrich/2015/10/26/der-zerfall-beginnt-am-balkan/ (last access October 26th 2016).
22_http://www.politico.eu/article/serbia-croatia-hungary-orban-migrants-schengen-crisis/
23_Translated and taken from http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/337964/Drustvo (last access October 26th 2016).

The message was clear and was exploited in the Serbian media to excess. This man of few words, who gave the impression of not being very happy about being interviewed, became a national symbol of the "big Serbian heart". In the small speech he had to give, when he was granted an award for humanity by the Serbian Minister of Interior, he did not feed this heroic image and simply said – in a strong south Serbian dialect most Belgraders in their urbane arrogance commonly make fun of: "There was a family waiting for the bus. The mother was very tired and she was sitting on the ground. The baby boy was crying, so I took him in my arms to play with him. Then someone must have taken a picture."[24]

However, the most interesting aspect and deeper implication of this media-hyped story of the "Serbian hero" of the "Balkan Route" – less graspable by but nevertheless of interest to the international audience – is that Rexhep Arifi is a member of the Albanian minority in south Serbia. This considered, this event and its media coverage went directly against the internal, following Milica Bakic-Hayden (1995), "nesting orientalism" in Serbia, where the image of the "Albanian" (as a rule, Muslim Albanian) represents one of the major "Oriental others". Hence, the "refugee crisis" in this case had a surprising and positive effect. It, at least temporarily, unsettled the Orientalist image of the "Muslim Albanian" – defined as male, violent and a constant threat to state sovereignty. Furthermore, representing a member of the Albanian minority and the multi-ethnic police in South Serbia[25] as the embodiment of Serbia's open-door and humane policy in the midst of the "refugee crisis" can be seen as a manifestation of a civic rather than a national identity politics.[26]

Summer in Belgrade 2015

As I arrived in Belgrade in late June 2015 to teach at the Faculty for Media and Communications located directly next to the main Bus and Railway Station, I was shocked. The area – primarily the local parks – were literally packed with people waiting for their buses and trains towards Hungary. While most of the passers-by behaved as if nothing was going on, the local entrepreneurs immediately adapted to the new demand.

24_Translated and taken by the author from: http://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/nagrada-heroju-iz-preseva-jednim-postupkom-je-raznezio-svet-a-skromne-reci-otkrivaju/brj896m) (last access October 26th 2016).
25_The municipalities of Preševo, Medvedja and Bujanovac have been sites of socio-economic and political neglect and marginalisation by the Serbian state as well as (militant) nationalism by segments of the Albanian minority. The multi-ethnic police reform in the aftermath of the 2000 and 2001 conflict aimed at contributing to mediation and stability.
26_However, this episode equally led to polarisations and critiques of Serbian media for referring to a member of the multinational police as a "Serbian policeman" and "hiding" his national identity, which would have been in the foreground in case of negative publicity (e.g. http://preporodbn.com/srpski-policajac-ni-slucajno-albanac/) (last access October 26th 2016).

Belgrade, July 2015 (photo by the author)

New fast food shops were opened and existing ones suddenly offered halal meat. Advertisements in Arabic – for food, clothing, bus tickets and even the purchase of Turkish Lira (see Image above)[27] – were all around. Some cab drivers were among those who profited most from the situation, charging horrendous sums for lifts to the Hungarian border: a taxi driver I once witnessed asking a family with five children for 300 Euros per person was totally unperturbed by my presence or their refusal. Subsequently, the cab companies introduced fines for drivers who took advantage of refugees.

The situation at the Bus and Railway Station Parks reflected the state's and the city's initial ignorance of the presence of the refugees. The few mobile water tanks that were the only humanitarian infrastructure on the site matched the striking lack of media reports of what was going on in a central part of the city. It was as if nothing was going on.

When I came back from Vienna at the end of August I encountered a completely different picture. The Bus and Railway Station Parks were completely transformed through new infrastructure, such as military tents, medical facilities, cell-phone charging stations, wireless internet etc. There was organised activity by diverse NGOs providing information in Arabic and Farsi, as well as food, first aid and clothes. In August an Asylum Centre was opened directly next to the Railway Station by the City of Belgrade and ADRA Serbia (Adventist Development and Relief Agency). The Asylum Centre provided legal and psychological counselling, mobile volunteer teams around the clock, computers, clothes storage, etc. The young multilingual team was comprised of students of Arabic and Persian and second-generation migrants from the Middle East, most of whom were children of former students who came to Belgrade to

27_Without going into the issue in depth in this text, the note attached to the shoelaces reading "Turkish Lira purchased" can also be read as a particularly apt manifestation of the transnational economic dimension of the "refugee crisis".

study from, for example, Syria or Palestine during the time of Tito-Yugoslavia and the Non-Aligned Movement.

The irony of the situation in late August and September was that as the number of refugees declined rapidly – due to the increasingly restrictive Hungarian border regime, which resulted in people heading directly to the Serbian–Croatian border without ever reaching Belgrade – the NGOs and their volunteers were literally competing to provide aid. As I joined ADRA volunteers we often encountered people on the site who thanked us for our help, but stated that they had enough food, water and as well as enough information. The "over-humanitarianised" site was increasingly less frequented and by the end of September there was a strangely deserted atmosphere of a site comprised of emptiness, but with traces of movement everywhere. The flattened grass in the parks and advertisements in Arabic there was no one left to read, attested to the past presence of mobility.

After their initial lack of both awareness and interest in July 2015 and throughout August 2015 Serbian politicians not only discovered that they could not continue to act as if nothing were happening, but also that they could use the influx of refugees to collect publicity points both in the country and internationally. Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić and his deputy Ivica Dačić did not tire of highlighting the humane and European character of Serbia and its people as well as the "impeccable Serbian policy regarding the 2015 Refugee Crisis" (Belgrade Centre for Human Rights 2016: 21). This line of argument was also convenient for discrediting other states, such as Macedonia, Croatia, Hungary or the EU as being "uncivilised", "un-European" and as violating human rights. The auto-Balkanising transit metaphor here turned into a sign of being civilised, humane and authentically European, since the freedom of movement of people in their quest for a better life was not hindered. Instead of a sign of inferiority, being a transit zone suddenly became a marker of superior or actual Europeanness.

Lost in the Permanence of Movement

Two entries – a statement and a narrative – occupied a prominent place both in my fieldnotes and my repeated attempts to understand what was going on along the "Balkan Route" by going beyond the "crisis talk" that dominated the media coverage.

The first one originates from a conversation I had with ADRA's local director. As he provided me with crucial information on what was happening at different sites in Serbia he offered the following conclusion and prognosis on the "Balkan Route": "It is not the people that are going to stay, but the movement."

The second related entry shows how – due to the permanence of movement – the individual is hard to grasp and, moreover, unfortunately often irrelevant.

A former schoolmate – who has been working at the local UNICEF office for years – told me about something that had happened the day before and how it frustrated her.

> You cannot imagine what a day we had yesterday. We have been establishing a UNICEF children's play corner at the Hotel Bristol next to the Bus Station. This was a secret project because Novak Djoković[28] was invited to play with the kids and get photographed. Anyway, I worked like hell for days and had to keep it secret and then when the day came and Djoković was on his way to Hotel Bristol, we realised, we forgot about the kids! Totally in panic I ran out to the park and started asking parents and kids if they wanted to come and play! It felt so absurd, running around and almost 'catching refugee kids' who were willing to play in our children's corner. At the end, we gathered just a few of them and the worst thing was that Novak at some point had actually burst out in tears in front of the cameras when seeing all the refugee kids around him. It was a terrible day. (Fieldnotes, September 2015)

UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador Novak Djoković interacts with children and their mothers at a UNICEF-supported child friendly space in Belgrade[29]

Apart from the critique of humanitarianism as a discourse and practice that – even though well-intended – is often exploitative of people in need and focused on creating a public moral image of "doing good" regardless of their actual needs and rights (see also Fassin 2011), this vignette also speaks to the issue of permanence of movement. It is a movement in which the individual is left out of

28_The then ATP number one tennis player.
29_See: http://www.unicef.org/serbia/media_28275.html (last access on October 26th 2016).

the picture or gets lost in – speaking with Liisa Malkki (1996) – a "sea" of "bare humanity". Seen from this perspective, the children, who have to be "caught" in the Bus and Railway Station Parks of the Serbian capital five minutes before an event that they should be the main beneficiaries of, represent the anonymous and "replaceable" figures of a moving and "humanitarianized" population.

Conclusion

Since the seminal work by Maria Todorova (2009), there has by and large been a consensus that the Balkans are imagined in a specific way, which differs from the discursive construction of "the Orient". Namely, rather than representing the "complete Other", the Balkans are instead imagined as the "incomplete self" of Europe. Theirs is a space, which in a temporal-ideological sense is framed in terms of an eternal "becoming" – of becoming modern, of becoming developed, of becoming European. In the context of the "refugee crisis" the Balkans indeed appeared not only as an eternal transit zone – where the only permanence seemed to be movement itself – but, moreover, as being caught up in an eternal and ambiguous transition to Europe, or rather "being European". Namely, while some states in the Balkans that are already members of the EU – as well as the EU itself – at times appeared as "less European" due to (violently) closing their borders to refugees, some EU candidate states appeared and styled themselves as the "actual" Europe.

Due to the contested and inconsistent EU migration policies related to the "migration crisis" and the continuing quest of many to reach – or reclaim – a better life in Europe, in future the Balkans are likely to embody both the "backyard of Europe" and an eternal "transit zone". As the "European solution" is unlikely to represent a solidary and just distribution of responsibility within the EU, but rather border closure and a selective exchange – or trade-off – of refugees (with other countries in the MENA region), the south-eastern margins of Europe are most likely to remain a contested and shifting frontier marked by equally unstable (im)mobility-patterns of being-stranded, settling down or in-between, moving on or returning.

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Teil 3

Flüchtlinge aus dem Nahen und Mittleren Osten in Österreich: Rechtliche Perspektiven und Initiativen zur Integration