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Event Analysis

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A Passage to Europe: Serbia and the Refugee Crisis

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Introduction

In this text, I approach Serbian experience of the refugee crisis by referring to three statements taken both as a reference and point of departure: first, Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić’s claim that Serbia was “more European than some European states”; second, the former Croatian Prime Minister Zoran Milanović’s claim that Serbia ought to “spread it [the refugees] around a bit”; and, third, Angela Merkel’s statement that the closure of EU borders could cause another war in the Balkans. These three statements, it is argued, provide convenient access to the official’s claims regarding the refugee crisis in Serbia and its echo in the region and abroad. In addition, in order to identify the views held by common people in Serbia, in the last section I will also briefly discuss popular reactions in Serbia to the issue of refugees in the last several years.

“More European than the Europeans Themselves”

In early March of 2016, the European Union announced the closure of the so called “Balkan route”. This was the path through which the vast majority of over million migrants arrived to European Union in 2015 and early 2016. Most of these people previously fled from Syria to Turkey, and then embarked on a risky journey that took them to some of the Greek islands by sea, and from there through Macedonia to Serbia. In most cases, their final goal was to reach Germany or some other wealthy European country like Austria, France or the United Kingdom.

Already in the midst of the refugee crisis, Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić praised Serbia as behaving more European towards refugees than some European states: “Serbia has not put up fences or barbed wire. It would be easy for us [to do so], while you in the EU were silent, when the fence was being erected [...] Serbia will receive a certain number of migrants. This makes us more European than some member states.”¹ Upon the route’s closure, Vučić was equally vocal about his country’s ethos in comparison to the EU: “Serbia did not want to gain political points, neither at home nor abroad, like many other, primarily EU countries, did.”²

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¹ See: Avramović, Filip and Igor Jovanović. 2015. *Serbia Will Take in Some Migrants, Vucic Says*. *Balkan Insight*, 1. September 2015 (accessed: 13. June 2016).

² See: Anon. 2016. *Vucic on Migrant Crisis: Egoism Reigns Among EU Countries*. *B92 News*, 30. March 2016 (accessed: 13. June 2016).

These statements are perhaps most interesting for their truly unexpected twist - Serbia emerging as the true promoter of the European values of open borders and compassion that the Europeans themselves are letting down, even giving moral lessons to the EU. *Politico* journalist Andrew Macdowall expressed this surprising turn in an article with a telling title “Wait, the Serbs are now the good guys?”³, which gathered just some of many positive reactions that Serbia received from the European officials and Western media.⁴

While it is the fact that Serbia did not build fences and that its officials and the media generally showed sympathy towards refugees, one cannot agree that this was all simple humanism deprived of political benefits. In short, in relation to the EU, Serbia did score political points. Firstly, it became important player in this game, if not for anything else, then for the fact that over 650 000 people crossed its territory in their journey towards the EU in 2015, followed by over 100 000 in the first months of 2016. Thus, Serbia truly figured and participated in most EU hosted debates, but mostly for its geographical than political significance. Second point worth mentioning is that Serbia had far easier task than any of the EU countries did for one simple reason - the refugees entering Serbia had one, and one goal only - to leave it as soon as possible. In such a situation, it was easy to brag about traditional Serbian humanism and hospitality. Equally so, one could easily question the sincerity of Vučić’s hopes “that some of them will stay and that Serbia will become their fatherland”. For what has Serbia, with one of the highest immigration rates in the world itself,⁵ and with some refugees from the wars in 1990s still remaining in the collective refugee centers,⁶ to offer to Syrian refugees? All in all, this meant that Serbia could display European values at no or little cost, and with much benefits to itself. And, in yet another twist, this would mean that Serbia was able to act European precisely because it is not, for benefits of the European wealth system and freedoms of the Schengen zone lie elsewhere.

“Spread it Around a Bit. Send them to Hungary”

While others subscribed to this image of the Serbs as the “good guys”, Croatian establishment notably maintained its traditional course of treating Serbia as the usual suspect. The first waves of refugees coming from Serbia to Croatia did not create any discomfort. Croatia was able to accept and accommodate over 1000 people daily, and such logistics sufficed until mid- September of 2015.⁷ Accordingly, Croatian officials were full of words expressing the country

³ Macdowall, Andrew. 2015. *Wait, the Serbs are Now the Good Guys?*. *Politico*, 18. September 2015 (accessed: 13. June 2016).

⁴ See, for instance: Radišić, Danica. 2015. *Serbian Police Officer and Smiling Syrian Boy Show Europe how Welcoming Refugees is Done*. *Global Voices Online*, 10. September 2015 (accessed: 13. June 2016); Pupavac, Vanessa and Milan Pupavac. 2015. *By Welcoming Syrian Refugees, Serbs Hope to Salvage Their Reputation*. *The Conversation*, 29. September 2015 (accessed: 13. June 2016).

⁵ Anon. 2014. *Ekonomске migracije (1): godišnje pobjegde jedan srpski grad*. *Vesti Online*, 7. April 2014 (accessed: 13. June 2016).

⁶ Danish Refugee Council. 2016. *Okvir odgovornosti: DRC Srbija i Crna Gora*. *DRC*, February 2016 (accessed: 13. June 2016).

⁷ Bradarić, Branimir / Ivanov, Davor / Kristović, Ivica / Borovac, Marina / Stefančić, Suzana and Tea Romić. 2015. *U Hrvatsku ušlo više od tisuću izbjeglica. Vlak iz Tovarnika sprema se za Zagreb*. *Večernji list*, 16. September 2015 (accessed: 13. June 2016).

readiness, good organization and humanism.⁸ The problem occurred when the number of people coming to Croatia was simply too big to maintain these standards that the officials publicly promoted. Croatian Prime Minister then responded by accusing Serbia that it does not control its borders and sends all the refugees indiscriminately to Croatia: “Spread it around a bit. Send them to Hungary”, he asked.⁹ In all honesty, Milanović’s statement was targeted to Hungarians, who first brutally prevent the refugees from coming to its territory and later infamously closed and fenced their border. But the Serbian media focused only on the part of the statement that addressed Serbian policy, and this spark was apparently enough to lit the fire of mutual accusations that at one point triggered reciprocal measures that led to a complete closure of Serbian-Croatian border. Serbian claims that they did not conspire with Hungarians nor instructed the refugees where to go were neither very persuasive nor helpful. It was rather clear that Serbia in September 2015 had no logistics, no financial or organizational capacities, and perhaps no political will, to get to grips with tens of thousands of refugees arriving on a daily basis. It thus did what seemed as the easiest way - letting them all go freely without a proper procedure, registration or assistance, and hoping that they will quickly leave the country and become someone else’s problem. Thus, once the path that took them through Hungary was closed, they all soon crowded Croatian borders. As it happens, the image of Hungarians as the true culprits faded from public discourse, while Serbian and Croatian officials exchanged the claims that their colleagues have been repeating too easily and too often in the last several decades.¹⁰ If one also adds to the equation the then upcoming elections in Croatia, social-democrat Prime Minister Milanović had all the reasons to publicly display his patriotism, and local political practice showed that the best way to do it in Croatia is to cast a few stones and pick a fight with the Serbians. Not that it helped him, though; he was defeated by the center/right wing HDZ, whose traditionally strong anti-Serbian sentiments were hard to match. Serbian officials themselves, of course, are equally ready to pick a few political points themselves by appearing strong towards Croatia and thus pretending to protect what little has left of Serbian dignity. The ultimate result are currently probably the worst relations between Serbia and Croatia in the last 15 or so years, and Croatian veto on Serbia opening chapters 23 and 24 in its EU accession process. When the Slovenes blocked Croatian EU membership back in 2008, Croatian officials swore that they will never use this as the political tool themselves. But, after what the Slovenes did to them in their EU accession process, did anyone really hoped they will let the Serbs get away that easily?

The Balkans as the EU Scarecrow

It is likely that these new Serbo-Croatian disputes informed Angela Merkel’s statement that the closure of border could lead to another Balkan war, which

⁸ Bradarić, Branimir. 2015. Ranko Ostojić o mogućem zatvaranju granica: Imamo potpunu kontrolu. *Vecernji list*, 16. September 2015 (accessed: 13. June 2016).

⁹ Anon. 2015. Milanović poručio Srbiji: Šaraj, malo, brate, šalji ih u Mađarsku. *Blic*, 22. September 2015 (accessed: 13. June 2016).

¹⁰ Kirka, Danica and Dusan Stojanovic. 2015. Border Tensions Rise Between Serbia and Croatia. *The Associated Press*, 24. September 2015 (accessed: 13. June 2016).

she issued to her fellow party members in early November 2015.¹¹ While Merkel deserves a praise within the debate over “Europeanness” of Europe for her attitude towards the refugee crisis (which, by the way, might likely cause her political downfall), this statement does not add to her reputation for its Balkanism, i.e. implied referral to the Balkans as the region of backwardness and conflicts. How exactly could this happen? What would be the trigger and which countries would participate in such a conflict? Over what would it be fought and with what goals and expectations? None of this deserved any elaboration whatsoever. As if the simple mention of the Balkan would be enough to scare German party members to adopt their party leader’s line. The Balkan, thus, can still be useful as the European Other in political discourse: and, thereby, perhaps conceal or dislocate the disturbing issue of actual conflicts between the refugees and citizens occurring in Germany at the time.

Unsurprisingly, her statement spurred public reactions in the Balkans and filled the media in Croatia and Serbia.¹² Local analysts, from the mentioned Croatian Prime Minister Zoran Milanović to a political analyst Ivan Vejvoda, univocally rejected such possibility.¹³ In addition, Serbian and Croatian officials appeared to have got the implicit message that they should cooperate and work together on finding the best solution to their common problems rather than quarrel. But, as usual as it is the case with Serbs and Croats, it is easier said than done. Nonetheless, they did seem to agree in their views that the Balkans is stable and that the EU enlargement policy is the best warrant for peace and stability in the Balkans. But, again, for it to work, the EU would need to have a unified approach to this and other issues, which is at present desperately lacking and showing its dysfunctionality. Perhaps Prime Minister Vučić was right - some European countries and leaders seem to increasingly behave un-European these days. But where he is wrong is that it does not make Serbia any more European.

Common Serbs: between hospitality and xenophobia

But, how did common Serbs feel about the refugees? Inasmuch as the positive attitude towards them in the Serbian media might have been arranged through some sort of government influence or public consensus over their representation, as some have claimed,¹⁴ this makes identifying the identifying attitudes of the ordinary Serbians towards them all the more complex.

For one thing, people coming to Serbia were consistently called refugees. People in Serbia are unfamiliar with terminological subtleties between an illegal immigrant, migrant or “sans papier” and the like, but they know too well from their recent troubled past what refugees running for their lives from war

¹¹ Nougayrède, Natalie. 2015. [We Should Heed Angela Merkel’s Warning of a New Balkans War](#). *The Guardian*, 5. November 2016 (accessed: 13. June 2016).

¹² See, for instance: Anon. 2015. [Teške riječi: Merkel izjavila što bi vrlo lako moralo moglo dovesti do rata na Balkanu](#). *Dnevnik*, 3. November 2015 (accessed: 13. June 2016); and Anon. 2015. [Merkel: Izbeglička kriza mogla bi izazvati rat na Balkanu](#). *Večernje novosti*, 3. November 2015 (accessed: 13. June 2016).

¹³ See: Anon. 2015. [Milanović Merkelovoj: Neće doći do rata na Balkanu](#). *B92 Net*, 3. November 2015 (accessed: 13. June 2016); [Vejvoda, Ivan. 2016. Vejvoda: Rat se neće vratiti na Balkan](#). *Newsweek*, 22. February 2016 (accessed: 13. June 2016).

¹⁴ Macdowall, *Wait, the Serbs are Now the Good Guys?*.

look like when they see one. Thus the refugees were consistently referred to in popular discourse as they should have been - that is, as refugees (“izbeglice” in Serbian). But that does not necessarily mean that the Serbs were “the good guys”, but that for them the present refugee crisis was less shocking and less of an (political, persona, security...) issue, since they witnessed similar things before. Furthermore, many volunteers and civil society organisations provided help for the refugees. Asylum Protection Center from Belgrade (<http://www.apc-cza.org/sr-YU/>) had many volunteers of various backgrounds and performed a range of Activities throughout the Serbian part of the refugee route. One ad hoc initiative gave birth to a center for helping refugees under the umbrella of the Refugee Aid Serbia (<http://refugeeaidmiksaliste.rs/2015/>). While the initiative has been inspired by foreigners living or passing by through Belgrade, most donations were made by the locals. Serbian Red Cross, however, for long remained poorly organized and without sufficient logistics, which is often the case with Serbian public institutions in general.¹⁵

Still, if one goes several years back in time, it is hard to resist the view that xenophobia and racism were not altogether absent from Serbian attitudes towards the refugees. Telling examples of those would be the cases of protest occurring in asylum seeker’s centers in Banja Koviljača and Bogovađa from 2011 to 2013.¹⁶ Both places are small Serbian towns in which refugee centers functioned without any notable complaints from the locals for decades. The problem arose when the number of immigrants dramatically increased from a few hundred to several thousands, thus coming close to the total number of local population. Even more troubling issue is that these people were coming here on their own, without registration or any recognizable official procedure at all. The locals revolted, accusing the refugees for a number of incidents, and demanded their immediate removal. It help little that the official statistics showed that the number of thefts and attacks against the refugees exceeded by far any incidents that they caused. Banja Koviljača is perhaps particularly interesting as it lies on the Serbian border with Bosnia, and at one point during the early 1990s it had far more refugees than the local population. But, as it appears, not all refugees are the same. Robert Lestmajster, the manager of the local asylum center, explains hostility towards predominantly Afghani and Somali refugees precisely by quoting a statement of one of many Bosnian Serbs who settled there after fleeing Bosnia during the 1990s: “I will not have some Mujahedeen walking around here, I had enough of them there.”¹⁷ When government officials announced their plan to move the refugees from Banja Koviljača to Surdulica, local dignitary threatened to launch public protests and

¹⁵ I am grateful to my colleague Mladen Ostojić who was an ardent volunteer throughout the crisis and who provided his first-hand account about these activities.

¹⁶ Pajić, S. 2011. *Meštani Banje Koviljače protestvovali zbog azilanata*. *Blic*, 6. November 2011 (accessed: 13. June 2016); Anon. 2013. *Bogovađa: Protesti zbog sve više azilanata*. *Al Jazeera*, 9. November 2013 (accessed: 13. June 2016).

¹⁷ “Neće se men’ ba ovdje šetati nikakvi mudžahedini, imao sam ih ja dosta tamo”, in Rudić, Mirko. 2014. *Netrpeljivost i šivača mašina*. *Vreme*, 3. April 2014 (accessed: 13. June 2016).

block the roads there as well.¹⁸ All in all, the local were, as it appears, equally if not more bitter at their own state for completely disregarding this issue, and once the question of refugees got some sort of institutional framework the protests stopped.

Conclusion

Serbian experience of the refugee crisis prior to the closure of the “Balkan route” could be conveniently summarized as follows: improving its image internationally and gaining a seat at the table where these issues were discussed alongside with the EU member states. On the downside, Serbian policy towards refugees received strong criticism from the Croatian establishment and contributed to the ongoing crisis in Serbian-Croatian relations which, in effect, enabled Angela Merkel to use the old image of the Balkans as the European “boogie men” that will burst into yet another war if the refugees were not allowed free access to the Schengen zone. Overall, it seems that some sort of national consensus over the image of refugees has been established between the Serbian establishment and the media, and they were positively and sympathetically portrayed throughout the crisis. Nonetheless, statements that emphasized the humanism and solidarity of the Serbian people are likely exaggerated. Some people and civil society organisations did respond to the call and provided aid for the refugees, but it is equally telling that there has been some popular discomfort in the places where refugees stayed for a longer period and where collective centers were to be built. Still, the entire refugee question remained relatively marginal in Serbia, arguably because it was clear from the onset that these people were simply crossing the country, thus hardly putting any strain to the existing political and social order, but perhaps also because, not that long ago, Serbian public already experienced massive exodus of refugees on its soil and was thus, for better or for worse, somewhat less shaken and stroke by the endless masses of people in search of comfort and shelter. The masses themselves, as so many before them, were coming and going with nothing except their bare lives, and most of us and our political structures did not care about them.

On the overall level, the refugee crisis showed once again how discursively productive yet porous is the distinction between the Europeans and barbarians, Europe and the Balkans. The end of the crisis came when the EU finally decided to close down the Balkan route, but the media continued to fill the news with footages of refugees being mistreated at the Macedonian or Greek border, which the European viewers can now follow with compassion but from a safe distance. But not all was hypocrisy. Some people in the EU, and in Serbia as well, did something, offering their hospitality to a multitude of million people. For most people, it seems, this multitude brought to Europe nothing but crisis, rise of radicalism and threat to its existence; but, fortunately, both EU and Serbia still has those who feel it actually showed that the idea of Europe continues to exist and that, unlike some battles that the Serbs fought in the past few decades, it is an idea worth fighting for.

¹⁸ Anon. 2011. *Vlast u Surdulici protiv smeštanja azilanata u staru kasarnu*. *Blic*, 21. November 2011 (accessed: 13. June 2016).

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