SLOVENIA: POST-SOCIALIST AND NEOLIBERAL LANDSCAPES IN RESPONSE TO THE EUROPEAN REFUGEE CRISIS

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Abstract

As a nation-state, Slovenia represents an increasingly rare case wherein 80 percent of the country identifies as ethnically homogeneous. Even in the face of this fact, Slovenia's ethno-national identity has been called into question since its independence. The European refugee crisis has brought this questioning into sharp focus as the admittance, care and transfer of refugees has caused burdens not only economically and logistically, but also in terms of what it means to be Slovenian and European at the same time. In a place with little history of provision of care for large-scale refugee populations, the cultural and political frameworks of Slovene society do not possess the crisis response capacity that its Northern European neighbors might. In fact, Slovenia's record on human rights is not as stellar as is often presented to the world at large. This paper argues that Slovenia's place in *Mitteleuropa* serves as a hindrance to it as a place of social care and reaffirms certain historical conditions that render it a transitory space between The Other and the 'real' Europe. It relies upon field observations of how Slovenia organized its response to the crisis in the autumn of 2015 and criticizes those responses as reaffirming both the post-socialist transition and the neoliberal intent of its national infrastructure and political economy.

Keywords: Europe, refugee crisis, Slovenia, borders, post-socialism, neoliberalism

Eslovenia: paisajes post-socialistas y neoliberales en respuesta a la crisis de refugiados en Europa

Resumen

Como un estado-nación, Eslovenia representa un caso cada vez más raro en el que el 80 por ciento del país se identifica como étnicamente homogénea. Incluso a pesar de este hecho, la identidad étnico-nacional de Eslovenia ha sido cuestionada desde su independencia. La crisis de refugiados en Europa ha traído este cuestionamiento sobre el tapete ya que el ingreso, la atención, y el traslado de refugiados ha causado cargas no sólo económicamente y logísticamente, sino también en términos de lo que significa ser esloveno y europeo al mismo tiempo. En un lugar con poca historia de prestar asistencia a las poblaciones de refugiados a gran escala, los marcos culturales y políticos de la sociedad eslovena no poseen la capacidad de responder a la crisis que podrían tener sus vecinos del norte de Europa. De hecho, el historial de Eslovenia en los derechos humanos no es tan estelar como a menudo se le presenta al mundo en general. Este artículo sostiene que la ubicación de Eslovenia en la Europa Central es un obstáculo a que sirva como un

lugar de atención social y reafirma ciertas condiciones históricas que la hacen un espacio transitorio entre "la otra" Europa y la Europa "real." Se basa en observaciones de campo de la forma en que Eslovenia organizó su respuesta a la crisis en otoño del 2015 y critica esas respuestas como formas de reafirmar tanto la transición post-socialista como las intenciones neoliberales de su infraestructura nacional y economía política.

Palabras clave: Europa, crisis de refugiados, Eslovenia, fronteras, post-socialismo, neoliberalismo

Introduction

In mid-September 2015, the first group of refugees fleeing conflict and economic conditions in Syria, Iraq and North Africa crossed the border at Dobova, Slovenia. While not unexpected, the first small group heralded a larger flow of refugees – seeking passage north and west in Europe – that rose to 8,000 persons a day by early November 2015. This article reports on fieldwork carried out from 28 October to 4 November 2015 at the Slovenian/Croatian border station at Dobova and the initial holding camp at Brežice, Slovenia, as well as at the Slovenian/Austrian border station in Šentilj, Slovenia. It also offers a perspective and analysis of crossing areas as spaces both of strict policing by the Slovenian state and of deep neoliberal meaning in terms of the built environment, latent post-socialist politics, and the outcomes of Slovenia's transition to the European Union. Finally, it offers a theoretical position whereby Slovenia's configuration of a corridor of control of the refugees represents a hybrid space where older methods of state power and control blend with newer realities. These realities are characterized as the willingness of the European Union (EU) to maintain neoliberal infrastructures in order to discipline a small state, Slovenia, and the unwanted interlopers – the refugees.

Slovenia in its European context

Slovenia has actively sought to strengthen its image as a full partner in working toward the dream of a larger geopolitical and economic power embodied in Europe and, in so doing, also seeks to distance itself from being associated too closely with the Balkans (Todorova 1994). However, at the same time, Slovenia is also positioning itself as a sort of elder sibling willing to help former fellow provinces of Yugoslavia gain membership of the European Union.

In many ways, the assertion that Slovenia is 'Europe in miniature' accords with reality. It is a tiny nation-state with a democracy and is now a full member of the European Union. It has integrated its economy into Europe's via the shared currency of the Euro, and is increasingly instrumental in brokering relations between Western Europe and the other states of the former Yugoslavia. Slovenia stepped into a position of full EU leadership when it took over the six-month presidency in January 2008.

Nevertheless, Slovenia has had growing pains during its period of transition from socialism. While the Slovenian break from Yugoslavia was neither sudden nor a repudiation of strong, central control of the economy (Woodward 1995), Slovenia's declaration of independence from the Yugoslav Federation did precipitate the demise of Yugoslavia as much as did the tensions between the Serbs and the Croats (Meier 1999; Ramet 2002; Woodward 1995). Once the break was made, the 1990s became a time of slow transition from Yugoslavia's market socialism to the neoliberal economics of Europe, accomplished through the filter of the European Union's accession process. The plodding process of the transition made the country the most relatively stable former communist country to join the European Union, but it has also hampered its wholesale transformation. Despite this process of entering into the disciplined club of neoliberal Europe, misbegotten efforts to preserve some sort of distinctive Slovenian ethnic identity in Europe exacerbated the social exclusion of minorities and foreigners within Slovenia (Cox 2005).

This latter 'growing pain', played out on the world stage when repressive measures were taken by ethnic Slovenes and the government against Roma in the southern village of Ambrus – actions that received condemnation from both the Slovene cultural ombudsman and the international community and caused the Council of Europe to intercede on the Roma's behalf. There is also the lingering problem of

stateless refugees, known as the *izbrsani* or 'Erased', living in Slovenia since the end of the Balkan wars (Applegate 2014; Bajt *et al*. 2010; Zorn 2005).

Other growing pains were embarrassing but, nonetheless, stultifying. The slow reform of the Slovene banking and lending systems created a perception that the country was not amenable to foreign direct investment. The privatization of large public concerns such as Žito – Slovenia's largest supplier of bread – and of other companies also moved at a snail's pace, even during the EU mandated liberalization of the economy prior to accession. Many corporations have proportionally large state ownership to this day, much to the consternation of Brussels. Foreign direct investment, though long a part of Slovenia's economic history in Yugoslavia – the large Renault factory in Novo Mesto is an example – slowed to match the pace of Slovenia's other reforms. Finally, even as Slovenia turned its back on its legacy as part of Yugoslavia, it assumed a colonizing business stance *vis-à-vis* the former Yugoslavia. For example, Mercator, a leading supermarket chain founded in Slovenia (and now, ironically, owned by a Croatian corporation), and Pivovarna Laško, a Slovene brewery now owned by Heineken International, managed to penetrate and dominate markets all over the region. Thus Slovenia enjoyed considerable cachet as it prepared to assume the EU presidency for six months in January 2008 yet, in reality, the process of transition continues.

Since Slovenia assumed the presidency in 2008, the structure of EU governance has changed externally and Slovenia has slid back to its small-nation status. Coterminous with this return to an older state of affairs in relation to Europe, the nature of Slovenian internal politics has fallen into a pattern of oscillating between center-right mild nationalist parties to center-left Europhile parties. First, a nationalist party will rule for a full four-year term, then a center-left party will come into power. This party will then rule likewise, until another term expires or smaller coalition parties force a no-confidence vote, triggering another election. Almost inevitably, among minor parties, confidence in larger parties – such as *Socialni demokrati* (SD), a left-center group, or Slovenska *Demokratska Stranka* (SDS), a nationalist party – wanes and the oscillation occurs again, with either a flip in coalition allegiances or the rise of a new party such as Prime Minister Miro Cerar's *Stranka modernega centra* (SMC), which currently holds sway nationally. Additionally, there have been periods where political parties have failed specifically because of corruption (i.e. Janez Janša's illegal military dealings with Finnish arms companies, which lead to his jailing) or ineffectiveness during the rule of Borut Pahor and his successor, Alenka Bratušek.

This strangely unstable political centrality has had enormous consequences upon internal policy in Slovenia, with continuing slow transition to what is acceptable to the EU's neoliberal structure, especially privatization, and also ineffective and often contradicting policy decisions made within months of the changes in governance after elections. In one particular policy area – minority relations – this paper is particularly interested. With each change, policies toward the nearly 20 percent of Slovenia's population who identify as 'non-Slovene' change as well or, even worse, are not followed at all. With the crossing of their border with Croatia of thousands of non-European migrants, this situation exacerbates Slovenia's ability to address the migration crisis. Internally the questions that politicians try to answer – 'How do we respond? Should we respond? Why us? Where is the EU?' and so forth – either go unanswered or, if they are responded to, the answers are disturbing and plainly wrong according to EU rules and human rights as constituted in place and time as the 'idea of Slovenia'.

Demographic, calculability and *Mitteleuropa*

With this context in mind, an understanding of the numbers and the calculable resources upon which the Slovenian state relies to determine who is within and who is without that which constitutes Slovenia is necessary. Refugees crossing borders are not just itinerants but are clearly residents, even for the briefest time within that territory. Therefore, they access and consume resources – both economic and otherwise – during their transit, creating costs – both economic and otherwise – and become political bodies within Slovenia itself. They are populating Slovenia even as

they are seeking egress from a place which they might not even realize is a different part of Europe from the one they had just left.

In population, Slovenia is easily one of the smallest European nations. At 2,060,166 people (2016 estimate), it is dwarfed by the largest members of the EU: Germany, the United Kingdom and France. Of that 2 million people, ethnic Slovenes comprise 76.4 percent of the population (RS Statični Urad 2016). The recent trend has been a gradual increase in ethnic minorities. In 1960, fully 95 percent of the population of the Yugoslav Republic of Slovenia reported Slovene as their ethnicity or as the language they spoke (Woodward 1995).

Today, the remaining 23 percent of the population is comprised of Hungarians, Italians, Serbians, Croats, Bosnians, Albanians, Roma and others. Hungarians and Italians make up 0.32 percent and 0.11 percent of the population respectively, and enjoy special constitutional protection of their languages, including a seat in parliament representing each ethnic minority. Serbs (1.98 percent of the population), Croats (1.81 percent) and Bosnians (1.10 percent) make up the largest minorities in Slovenia and either are residual populations afforded residency in Slovenia after the secession or are work-seekers who have emigrated there. Other ethnic minorities are Macedonians (0.20 percent), Montenegrins (0.14 percent), Albanians (0.31 percent), and Roma (0.17 percent). Additionally, the Slovene government categorizes a full 12.14 percent of the population as 'Other' (RS Statični Urad 2016). The Slovenian constitution formally defines the community as a nation and is not pluralistic *per se* (Deets 2005). It acknowledges certain members of its ethnic diaspora as members – though not necessarily citizens – of the Slovene nation, and recognizes languages other than Slovene as minority languages, specifically Italian and Hungarian. Other South Slav and regional languages (Roma, Istrian, Vlach, etc.) are not recognized. Slovene citizenship (as opposed to nationality) can be extended to persons who are not Slovene by ethnicity. The rights of these other minorities are only addressed via statutory law

Continuing the theme of 'Europe in miniature', Slovenia resembles other members of the European Union in several ways. Its population density (97 inhabitants per square kilometer) is average for Europe. Other metrics such as birth rate (8.8 per thousand), death rate (9.4 per thousand) and age distribution all reflect the general trend among Southern European countries, where population growth rates have slowed drastically or are now negative and the population is aging. The present 2 million figure for Slovenia was expected to decline over the next few years, bringing with it the specter of economic hardships and hard choices for policymakers seeking to blunt the effects of population decline and aging; however, recent data have shown a turnaround in birth rates. In 2006, raw birth rates were up 4.3 percent over 2005, with 2006 showing 9.4 births per 1,000 people. Slovene people live relatively long lives – men average 73 years and women average 80 years (RS Statišcni Urad 2016). Again, these measures align Slovenia with the rest of Europe in general.

Throughout the transition, however, Slovenes have varied from greater Europe in their rural/urban residential patterns, with many Slovenes still residing in small towns and villages; however, this is primarily because Slovenia is essentially a commuting country where people live in villages and travel to work in urban areas. Ljubljana (pop. 275,000) and Maribor (pop. 170,000), as well as smaller cities such as Novo Mesto and Koper, attract workers who split their time between rural and urban life, returning daily or weekly to their 'home villages' (RS Statišcni Urad 2016).

This tiniest of places, therefore, is a land of workers, farmers, teachers and many others engaging in what they would imagine as Slovenian everyday life. Nevertheless, larger forces are at play in the Slovenian life space, playing a game reaffirming Slovenia as very European, especially if viewed as a place where very traditional European politics take place not for the advantage to Slovene everyday life, but for larger geopolitical reasons bound by neoliberal and globalizing agendas. As small nation, it has not the resources to accommodate refugees, nor does it have the history or, at worst, the willingness, to *become* a place where refuge can be found. Therefore, Slovenia, through its

border zones where the refugee crisis has manifested itself, has been reimagined as part of *Mitteleuropa* (Patterson 2003). It is being reaffirmed as a threshold space stripped of meaning, and as a locus of how Europe responds to consequences – of its own making – of itself as Europe.

The following two sections are descriptions of observations made at the border crossings between Croatia/Slovenia and Slovenia/Austria and are meant to be both illustrative of the situation – but by no means anything more than the observations of a researcher in a fluid situation – and the frameworks upon which a concluding theory of how *Mitteleuropa* has been recreated and how post-socialist and neoliberal landscapes have served to lead to that point.

The Dobova/Brežice crossing area

Dobova and Brežice lie along the main railway line running from Ljubljana, Slovenia to Zagreb, Croatia – a distance of less than 100 kilometers. After the breakup of Yugoslavia in 1991–1992, this border crossing became famous for its tedious delays while the police checked travel papers on each passenger train. With the loosening of border regulation when Croatia accessed the EU, the waiting times diminished or disappeared, especially at the superhighway crossing that lies a few kilometers away. During the late summer and early autumn of 2015, what was once a restrictive border – now transformed into a Schengen crossing – changed into a hybrid crossing where the neoliberal, globalized EU regime clashed with Slovenia's and Croatia's security states.

In the field, control of the refugees in Croatia was not observed. I did not cross the border into Šenkovec, Croatia, but saw refugees being brought across the border into Dobova via a transfer from the Croatia police to Slovenian authorities. The Croatian authorities were fully militarized, with assault weapons, reinforced vehicles and police dogs fully deployed. In some cases, border guards were physically shoving refugees across the border into Slovenia, where they were met by a similarly equipped Slovene force. They were further corralled onto buses and transported to a processing camp in Brežice, the municipality in which Dobova is a smaller village.

This camp consisted of several tent structures built on landed donated by the multinational Mercator supermarket corporation (personal interview with an Interior Ministry official in 2015). In the Slovene press, this donation was represented as magnanimous at the least and a sign of the multi-pronged response to the refugee crisis in Slovenia. A week prior to my visit, a fire broke out in the camp, destroying several of the tents. The processing of refugees conducted here included medical attention and feeding and, according to an official from the Slovenian Ministry of the Interior, care was taken to keep families together. However, independent assessments of activities focused on refugee welfare at the Brežice crossing found the response to be inadequate, poorly organized, and primarily a police action (personal interview with Kogovšek 2015). Transfers from the tent area – where processing occurred – to another holding area were typically unsettling events where police dogs, heavily armed officers and militarized equipment were present. The relatively silent refugee groups were drowned out by loud orders over speakers and shouting from officers, including vulgarities. The scene was evocative of a cattle drive in the Western US and was characterized by one observer as the 'animalization' of the refugees (personal interview with Kogovšek, Ljubljana 2015). Refugees had limited contact with aid agencies, with control of their bodies in place being prioritized over the distribution of care. Often a line of police officers was between the refugees and aid workers, leading to an inability to communicate needs effectively. The refugees were subsequently kept in open areas, even overnight in near-freezing, late-October and early-November temperatures.

After time at the Brežice camp, the refugees were loaded onto buses destined for the Austrian border crossing at Šentilj. The quality of the buses ranged from modern coaches to older Maribor and Ljubljana city buses. The authorities did not crowd refugees onto the buses, limiting, by rough observational count, the passengers per coach to about 40. After departing the camp complex, the buses made it to a second transit camp. Normally, this drive would take between one

and a half and two hours, but the speed of the buses was limited by mountain climbs, even on the superhighway, and the circuitous route necessary to reach the Austrian border north of Maribor.

The Šentilj border area and theoretical implications

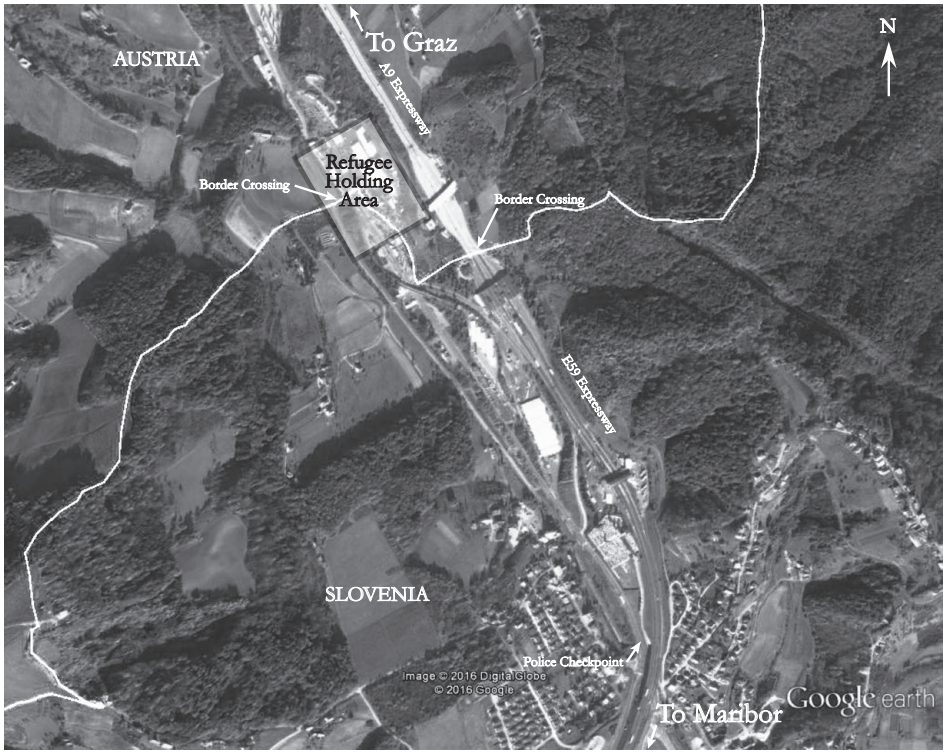
The first sensation of the border crossing at Šentilj is of its relative emptiness compared to the crowd of refugees at the border with Croatia. Two competing and coordinating factors make it the case. There are two border areas between Slovenia and Austria here. One is the much older crossing along Dunajska Cesta (literally, 'Vienna Street') from Šentilj to Bubenberg in Austria. The dual carriageway has the requisite pullout lanes for inspection, an old customs structure for administrators and border police; on the eastern side of the street is a railway line connecting the center of Spielfeld, to the north of Bubenberg, to Šentilj's railway station.

The other is the superhighway connection that bypasses the small municipal street along a concrete viaduct towering above the customs checkpoint in between the villages. The A9/E59 highway is the high-speed connection between Maribor in Slovenia and the Austrian city of Graz in Styria. An older customs and border checkpoint sits disused as transport trucks, buses and personal automobiles speed by at 130 kilometers an hour. The scene beneath the concrete viaduct was very different from above.

Šentilj's pace was that of a border village going about its business when refugees were not present. People laid wreaths on the graves of ancestors – it was All Souls' Day – others were taking in the last of the hay for the winter off their *kozolci*, a distinctly Slovenian hay-drying rack, and others were merely passing through to the villages farther south for the holiday. Any day in which refugees were present, however, revealed a different Šentilj: the well-appointed Dunajska Street, with its clearly marked bicycle lanes, was lined with police officers and streets were blocked by patrol cars. Where refugees had been on the road leading down to the border crossing, they had discarded personal articles either acquired in Slovenia or that would have little use beyond Slovenia, had become worn out or, possibly, were not allowed any further by the Slovenian and/or Austrian authorities. Shoes, blankets, jackets and grocery bags, both paper and plastic, were left strewn around when the refugees were taken to a secured tent complex where they were processed and passed along the border to Austrian officials.

The results of billions of Euros of investment allowed Europeans, and the odd American geogra-

Aerial View of Šentilj processing center



Source: GoogleEarth, 11 May 2015.

Note: Highlighted area shows the processing center. On the eastern side of the processing area, the construction of a passenger loading siding for Austrian ÖBB rail operations for the refugees was nearing completion. Dual carriageway A9/E59 is to the west of the processing area. The Dunajska Cesta border station, a municipal street crossing, is in the middle of the processing area.

pher, to drive across the above border at speeds normal to the capitalist world: 130 kilometers an hour or the distance between Philadelphia and New York, in the same amount of time. As a symbol of neoliberal power, change and space, the highway viaduct almost erased the scene transpiring beneath it: the last gasps of twentieth-century Europe being played out as a part of a practical bifurcation of *Mitteleuropa* in order to re-establish *Mitteleuropa* in its role as a liminal space not between Europe and 'the East' but between European integration and the construct of Europe-as-integration.

In Šentilj, the Austrians and Slovenians in late October, on the land between Dunajska Cesta and the railway line, were constructing a siding for ÖBB passenger trains to receive refugees from the out-processing camp. Interestingly, this camp was not much more than three tents, where a variety of services were provided to the refugees. Observation was difficult because the authorities would not allow unpermitted personnel such as myself past a checkpoint 300 meters south of the tents. A Ministry of the Interior official assured me that the tents were used to carry out a final check of the refugees' status, before they were sent somewhere else down the line into Austria. Figure 1 shows satellite photography from 3 November 2015, two days after my fieldwork ended in Šentilj. The landscape of the photograph depicts, from a 'God's eye view', the processing center; the differentiated crossings are contrasts between the post-socialist control space and the neoliberal space of free flow and circulation only controlled by an inexpensive highway tax vignette affixed to the windshields of the European cars moving to and fro in the Austria/Slovenia border space.

This photograph is the only available representation of the situation. All photography of actual refugees for research purposes was suppressed by the police as a matter of protection of the former under international guidelines, despite copious depictions of various refugee families and individuals being represented in the media. To the Slovenian media's credit, faces were blurred out in the reports on the air, but one could easily discern their clothing, their gender and the number of refugees shown on television at the border crossings.

At Šentilj, however, other invidious signs on the landscape existed. The local Tuš supermarket, directly on Dunajska Cesta and within a kilometer of the border crossing, was closed for the foreseeable future, according to a sign on the door. A patron of the Mol petrol station adjacent to the supermarket spoke of refugees, on foot, buying every practical item of food and hygiene off the station's shelves. Additionally, she spoke of the automated teller machine being drained of cash by refugees using bankcards. Most media representations of the refugees coming through Šentilj accurately portrayed them as victims of circumstance and clear in their intentions to arrive in their final destinations, such as Germany, Scandinavia or Britain; however, the tabloids railed against wealthy, military-aged young men talking on cell phones and wearing designer clothing.

While using class and race as a lever against the refugees was to be expected among nativist and nationalist groups, the trope of the wealthy refugee was deeply ingrained among average Slovenians (personal interview with Blatnik in Ribnica, 2015). However, when presented with alternative hypotheses that focused on perceptions of refugees using modern technology to try to call relatives or friends in places like Germany, to contact relatives or friends from whom they had become separated along the way, or to organize visas and legal papers, these options were not dismissed out of hand either. Among Slovenes, the nature of who and what the refugees are is not as clear as the rhetoric politicians and policymakers relate in the media.

Theoretically, the separate border crossings in Šentilj are not separate from each other but are an infrastructural manifestation of the contest playing out between the way the old order of the Slovenian state would handle such a problem and the new order of the neoliberal Slovenia and the image it would rather present to Europe and the world. Interestingly, the stringing of barbed wire along Croatian borders was protested against during the fieldwork period by various environmental groups, claiming that it con-

travened EU conventions on the free flow of wildlife such as deer and bears across the borders. Images of dead deer and other animals flowed on social media. The irony of these protests was not lost in a theoretical sense. Well-meaning Slovenes decrying the deaths of non-humans cannot be dismissed as naïve, but the implication that emanates out of the symbolism of such upset is that refugees are not being dehumanized so much as animalized by the mobile camp infrastructure.

Becoming refugees under control: linking Brežice to Šentilj

In conclusion, I would like to sketch out a brief three-point research and fieldwork agenda inspired by the observations of these border crossings, inasmuch as both the duality of Šentilj and the linearity of Brežice are internal structures of a larger system of control that spanned Slovenia in the first three months of the crisis. First, as a camp infrastructure, what was observed destabilized the fixity of 'the camp as place'. It was a mobile camp with modes of control linked in ways that kept refugees in their flow towards their perceived destinations, and was also, most importantly, keeping them out of circulation within Slovenia.

Second, the form of the mobile camp was limber in and of itself. It was adaptable and could react because of its use of the neoliberal infrastructure of the EU highway system; however, when that flow of refugees met border controls, it could deploy legacy systems of control kept in place by post-socialist realities. The contemporary analogy would be a modern computer network that can support legacy applications with special physical and software adaptors. The formal representations of the control points at the borders as linear flows between post-socialist countries, Slovenia and Croatia, and the bifurcation at the borders between the neoliberal countries of Slovenia and Austria, are those adaptations.

Finally, the specter of *Mitteleuropa* has re-emerged and the political implications of such an event are fascinating. Three outcomes come to mind: the end of the European Union as a liberalizing, globalizing force; the beginning of a new stage in Fortress Europe; and, possibly, the loss of the Balkans – again, because of the gimlet eye that Europe has for the region. No longer can Europe, as a thing-in-and-of-itself, be free of flows and circulatory systems because of these physical barriers for the refugees. This outcome is an obvious one. Less obvious is how the Northern European project, especially Germany's, has created that which war could never do: a continental system of control that looks natural, that looks European and that looks like a responsible political space. The third outcome is the disciplinary piercing stare of Brussels against its newest and weakest members. While Slovenia's accession is further in the past than Croatia's union with Europe, the allowing of the two former Yugoslav republics to participate in border politics outside of European law means that Europe is either willing to discipline them further or to let them go. It would have, naturally, the political justification to do so.

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