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Movements upon Movements: Refugee and Activist Struggles to Open the Balkan Route to Europe

Nadia El-Shaarawi and Maple Razsa

ABSTRACT

In 2015–2016, 1.2 million refugees sought safety in Europe via the Balkan Route. How, in an era of securitized borders, did this unprecedented movement of people from the global south reach the global north? Ethnographic research from two post-Yugoslav nodes along the Route—Preshevë, Serbia and Ljubljana, Slovenia—offers answers that diverge from state-centric accounts, revealing that the relationships between movements, in the sense of both migration and activism, were integral to the dynamics of the Route.

KEYWORDS

Mobility; migration; postsocialism; activism; Slovenia; Serbia; Yugoslavia; Europe

Introduction

On 4 September 2015, thousands of refugees¹ were camped out at Hungary's Keleti station. They had been waiting for trains that would carry them to Austria and then Germany. The previous day, the Hungarian government had convinced several hundred to board regional trains, promising that they would be conveyed to the Austrian border. Too late, when their train was surrounded by riot police, the passengers realized they had been deceived—the trains were bound not for the border but for camps within Hungary (Kasperek and Speer 2015).

When news of the deception reached those camping at Keleti, a decision was taken by the assembled crowd. If they could not trust the trains or the Hungarian government, they would walk the 170 km to Austria. Collecting their possessions and carrying those who could not walk, thousands set off on foot together. Images of columns of people walking along the highway toward the border circulated globally and soon their journey was dubbed the March of Hope.

While the March of Hope was one climax of what some activists would come to call the 'long summer of migration' (Kasperek and Speer 2015; Moving Europe 2016) and what others dubbed the 'European refugee (or migrant) crisis,' for refugees it was only one part of a longer journey along what came to be known as the Balkan Route, extending from Turkey, to Greece, through the countries of the former Yugoslavia and Hungary, before reaching Western Europe. By the time they had reached Keleti station in Budapest, refugees had likely undertaken dangerous journeys in rubber boats across the Aegean, slept in squatted hostels or public parks in Athens and Belgrade, crossed borders demarcated with razor wire fences and so-called 'green borders' without official checkpoints,

taken taxis, buses, trains and other infrastructure of mobility (Walters 2015) or at times, as they did in Hungary and Southern Serbia, simply walked.

In popular memory, and most media accounts, the Balkan Route was opened by the humanitarian impulses of German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Merkel, it is remembered, famously declared an open-door policy under the slogan '*wir schaffen das*' (or 'we can do this'). To be sure, much can be learned from studying the Route from above—for the policy responses of Germany and other European states were crucial to the ways the Route was opened (*and* later closed). But our longstanding research and ongoing fieldwork with refugees, local communities, and migrant rights activists along the Balkan Route—studying the Route from below—point to a more complicated account of how the Route was opened. For example, when Merkel issued her declaration, effectively opening Germany's borders to those seeking asylum, the March of Hope was already making its way toward Austria and images of its progress had been beamed around the world. Instead of seeing refugees as objects of policy, or as reactive agents being 'pulled' and 'pushed' by legislation and regulations, we show how refugees themselves, alongside a variety of local and transnational social movements, were integral to opening the Route.

In this article, we focus on two post-Yugoslav nodes of the Balkan Route: the Southern Serbian border municipality of Preshevë² and Second Home, a 'migrant organizing hub' in Ljubljana, Slovenia, to demonstrate how the ethnic violence, forced migration, and nationalist state-making that characterized the dissolution of Yugoslavia gave rise to local movements against this violence, which influenced the specific forms the Route took. We contend that ethnographically examining the interaction of the 'Balkan Route' with the earlier migration and social movements generated by the 'Balkan Wars,'³ provides a revealing position from which to contribute to the growing critical border literature on Europe.

As De Genova (2017, 22) argues, the critical European border literature helps us to grasp that it is not the presence of refugees who create a 'European Refugee Crisis' but the character of the European project itself. Scholars in this tradition (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; De Genova 2017) argue that Europe is, first, implicated through its colonial legacies in the global violence that it now represents as exterior to it, including the violence that displaced many who travelled the Route. Second, the study of bordering, in the broad sense of the word, brings into relief the underlying racial formation of Europe as a fortress of whiteness (Balibar 2004; Danewid 2017). Nowhere, perhaps, is the unsettling of Europe as productive, or as sorely needed, as in its 'Balkan borderlands,' which are sometimes interior and sometimes exterior to Europeanness. After all, the designation of things as *Balkan* is not only geographical but has an important, often discriminatory, history (Bjelić and Savić 2002). The violence of the wars of Yugoslav succession (which precipitated the previous European refugee crisis in the 1990s) was represented as *Balkan* (and therefore primitive) in contrast to a civilized Europe (Bjelić and Savić 2002). On the other hand, Rexhepi has shown how 'Europeanness' is mobilized to discipline local Muslims in the Balkans—and to divide them from extra-European Muslims (2018). Indeed, the designation of 'Balkan Route,' initially named as such by Frontex, the EU's border enforcement agency, carried overtones of the region's putative criminality even before the mass movement of 2015 began. For our part, we attend ethnographically to the interplay between the Balkan Route and the ongoing effects of the 'Balkan Wars,' i.e., the wars of Yugoslav succession. We show that, in fact, these were violent processes

of *Europeanizing* Serbia and Slovenia—in the sense of razing the complex ethnic legacies they inherited from the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires, legacies which were sustained within multiethnic Yugoslavia, in favour of nation-states (Hayden 2000). This Europeanizing violence spawned resistance movements that, in addition to other local conditions, contributed to the opening of the Route. Such critical attention to the Balkan Route and the struggles of people for freedom of movement exposes the violence at the heart of the European project, as well as the ongoing way Europe is shored up as a racialized formation through its myriad bordering practices—but it also points toward other possible responses to people on the move, toward other possible Europes.

In what follows, we first lay out a chronology of the Balkan Route through its four phases: clandestine route, open route, official Balkan Corridor, and back to a (always imperfectly and again clandestine) closed route. We then explain how our larger research project emerges from the unexpected intersection of our previously distinct research trajectories within radical political networks in the Balkans and forced migration in the Middle East. Considering how the route brought these research trajectories together, we ask what happens when scholarly questions associated with (figurative) social movements—that is political activism—and (literal) social movements—that is migration—are brought into conversation. We then briefly review the specific methodological strategies we have adopted to study this assemblage of movements upon movements, in both senses, which is profoundly transnational and fluid, but also contextually specific in each of its nodes across Europe. We offer ethnographic portraits of the border struggles that unfolded around the two post-Yugoslav nodes, showing how previous patterns of migration generated by the violence of state formation—and social movement resistance to that violence—shaped the Balkan Route. In conclusion, we reflect on what these movements upon movements, in both senses, reveal about the current crisis of Europe.

The four phases of the Balkan Route/Corridor

The Balkan Route, by virtue of the complexity and volatility of patterns of mobility and immobility as well as the diversity of experiences and itineraries of people who have travelled it, resists simple temporal and spatial categorization. Nonetheless, before delving into specific nodes along the Route, it is necessary to survey it as a whole, to show how it changed over time, and to provide historical context for the specific nodes we discuss.

Across the spring and summer of 2015, an existing clandestine migration route to Europe—the Balkan Route—grew dramatically. For years, people on the move had made their way from Turkey to Greece, often with the help of smugglers, either across Greece and Turkey's land border or by sea to Greece's Eastern Aegean Islands. But with smaller numbers of people moving along the route and its geography through mountainous terrain and small villages (Beznec, Speer, and Stojić Mitrović 2016), the Route was overshadowed by the Central Mediterranean Route until 2015.

With more than three million refugees from the civil war in Syria living in limbo in Turkey, among other factors, many more people began to travel along the Route. During 2015, hundreds of thousands of people made the maritime crossing and arrived, often in rubber boats, on the shores of Greek Islands such as Lesbos, Chios, Samos, and Kos. Once on the islands, the arrivals—from Syria but many other countries as well—made their way to the Greek mainland before travelling northward and westward by land.⁴

When authorities along the Route attempted to stop their movement by closing borders, thousands of refugees quickly gathered at these blockages, initially at the Macedonian and later at the Hungarian border. The gathering crowds at such chokepoints made possible numerous collective struggles to press through police lines.⁵ By late summer, the front lines of these struggles were ‘further and further removed from any imagined outer periphery or frontier of Europe, in a dramatic dialectic of contestation,’ (De Genova 2017, 11). The March of Hope was the culmination of this series of what can be understood as ‘border struggles’ (Euskirchen, Lebuhn, and Ray 2010; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Nyers 2015). In other words, the earlier phase of an invisible and clandestine Balkan Route became an open Balkan Route.

By summer of 2015, thousands of refugees were entering Europe per day. The open Route utterly disrupted the EU border regime, upending a system designed to manage and immobilize migration far from Europe’s wealthy core (Euskirchen, Lebuhn, and Ray 2007; Casas-Cortes et al. 2015), and throwing the Union into political crisis. In response to the open route, states implemented a formalized Balkan Corridor, an unprecedented development in which governments, faced with large numbers of people on the move, facilitated their onward movement by providing temporary documents and transport in specialized buses and trains, essentially shuttling people through their territory. The Corridor was not a coordinated strategy but was implemented gradually and in piecemeal ways by states. Beginning in Serbia and Macedonia as early as the spring and early summer of 2015, the Corridor finally spanned the continent when Germany effectively opened its borders in early September 2015 by suspending the Dublin Regulation—an EU agreement that requires people to apply for asylum in the first EU state they reach or risk deportation back to that first state if they travel elsewhere.⁶ Merkel made the decision to suspend this agreement as the March of Hope crossed Hungary headed for the German border and it appeared that only the most extreme, violent, and, most importantly, *embarrassing* measures would prevent mass entry into Germany (Alexander 2017). Her decision, furthermore, was constrained by the response of ordinary Germans, as well as activists, who succeeded in reframing the ‘migrant crisis’ as a ‘refugee crisis’ by arguing that these were refugees deserving of protection, not economic migrants who could be turned away.

The state-organized Corridor accelerated travel across the region even as it reasserted a degree of state control that eventually enabled its closure. Nonetheless, seven months were required for the EU to muster the resources, policing strategies, international agreements, and political pretexts necessary to re-impose the border regime. By March 2016, when the Balkan Corridor was closed, 1.2 million people had travelled the Route/Corridor. Currently, the route is in its fourth and closed phase, once again clandestine, if with new layers of securitization and violent enforcement. While these four phases—clandestine Balkan Route, open Balkan Route, official Balkan Corridor, and closed Balkan Route—are useful for organizing our thinking on the route, they gloss a great deal of complexity. Crucial for our argument is the outlier in the narrative laid out in the four phases: Hungary’s reaction to the Route.

Less than two weeks *after* Merkel’s statement, Hungary—which had already begun to build a border fence in July 2015—fully closed and militarized its border in mid-September 2015, including passing legislation that made border-crossing a serious criminal offence. There was a dramatic confrontation with riot police at the Röszke-Horgoš border crossing

between Serbia and Hungary when thousands of refugees, responding to Merkel's pledge, arrived to find the border nonetheless closed. As images of teargassed and bleeding refugee families ricocheted through the global media, international condemnation of Hungary was blistering. The Route quickly *rerouted* itself, however; refugees began to travel instead across Croatia to Slovenia, which we describe below.⁷

What is important to note for our argument, is that from September onward, the Balkan Corridor spanned ex-Yugoslavia from its one-time Southern border with Greece to its one-time Northern border with Austria. The Balkan Route traversed territories that had only recently come to be divided by the borders of the states that succeeded Yugoslavia, territories crisscrossed with violent new bordering practices. Today, Yugoslavia's successor states and territorial entities reflect the spectrum of possible relationships to European integration.⁸ Yugoslavia's territorial fragmentation, with the range of hierarchical relationships to European integration this produced, has been accompanied by the splintering of the once unified population that held Yugoslav citizenship. These new citizenries, like the territories with which they are associated, possess varying relationships to the EU and varying degrees of mobility and access to the territory and labour market of the EU, as becomes clearer when we examine the dynamics of citizenship during the formation of Slovenia as an independent state in the section on Second Home. While traversing the checkerboard of borders and bordering practices (Reeves 2014) that characterizes the relatively new post-Yugoslav states, the Corridor roughly followed the path of one of Yugoslavia's paradigmatic infrastructure projects: The Highway of Brotherhood and Unity. In so doing, the Balkan Route not only encountered the bordering practices of the new nationalist states, but also intersected with the social movements that sprang up in response to those nationalist politics.

Intersecting research trajectories

We began this project in early fall of 2015, when we realized that our previously distinct research trajectories were being woven together along the Balkan Route. Razsa has long done research within radical activist networks in the former Yugoslavia and beyond, with a special focus on migrant labour organizing and anti-border protests (Razsa and Kurnik 2012, 2014), as well as antinationalism, transnational networking, and the radical political imagination (Razsa 2015). El-Shaarawi's ethnographic work in the Middle East and North Africa has focused on urban displacement in the global south as a form of containment (El-Shaarawi 2015) and refugees' often challenging experiences as they navigate formal resettlement programmes (El-Shaarawi 2012). As we followed the unfolding story of the Balkan Route, we found that the activists with whom Razsa has long worked were spreading out along the route and forming a number of solidarity initiatives and support structures for refugees, refugees much like those with whom El-Shaarawi had worked for years. Bringing refugees and radical activists into the same ethnographic and analytic frame is not only, however, the contingent outcome of our research agendas intersecting. In this case, what makes the activists radical is their desire to eradicate what they see as the 'root' (Day 2004, 372) of exclusion and inequality: borders and restrictions on mobility. In this way, they share a common concern with refugees that is not necessarily shared by the many other actors involved on the Route, some of whom may provide aid to refugees in ways that contribute to their immobilization, as in

refugee camps for example. These two constituencies, then, have become the most full-throated defenders of the Route, united by a demand—and a concrete practice—of ‘freedom of movement.’ What is more, what began as clandestine migration has become recognizably a social movement, with protests, direct actions, and demands, for example, even as it has come to collaborate with longstanding, if divergent, local and transnational social movements along the route.

Methods

As we have followed the emergence of the Route, and conducted fieldwork in multiple trips along it over the past two years, its complexity as an assemblage became clearer. In this it is not unlike other transnational assemblages, such as international supply chains (Tsing 2009; cf. Ong and Collier 2008) and the alterglobalization ‘movement of movements’ (what the media frequently called the antiglobalization movement) (Juris 2008). Those who travelled the route came from dozens of countries, which they had left for myriad reasons. Syrians, Iraqis, and Afghans were most numerous but we also met Eritreans, Iranians, Congolese, even Cubans travelling through the Balkans. A heart-breaking number told harrowing stories of why they left their homes and what had happened on their journeys. A number of other routes converged on, and intersected with, the Balkan Route. People travelled from Central Asia, the Middle East, North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. Some travelled through, relatively speaking, more elite and comfortable smuggling networks, accessible to those who could afford forged passports. Others initiated more independent and self-organized travel, including many Afghan men and boys, who simply walked large stretches of their journeys. Additionally, the Route crossed a staggering number of regional, national, and local contexts, each with distinct relations of force, histories of migration, and topographies of ethnicized conflict.

In developing the methods to study this assemblage of movements (cf. Allen and Jobson 2016, 131), we have born in mind the recognized pitfalls of work on the postsocialist world where, as Kurtović and Sargsyan point out, the focus on nationalist, reactionary, and right-wing politics has dominated (this issue). As Keith Brown has argued, work on the Balkans in recent decades has, perhaps understandably, been preoccupied with questions of ethnic identity and conflict, or national history, even though in the region ‘routes matter as much, if not more than, roots’ (2010, 819). Attention to routes will expose the region’s ‘hidden histories, economies of mobility, and geopolitical alliances with the wider world’ (Henig 2016, 909). In addition, migration studies, it has long been lamented, is often enmeshed in methodological nationalism (Malkki 1995; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002), while an emphasis on stasis over movement may be a broader disciplinary disposition (Sopranzetti 2017, 9). So, we have endeavoured to put the Route, and the struggle for mobility, at the centre of our methods. We travelled along the Route(s) multiple times, from the Eastern Aegean island of Lesbos, where approximately half the crossings from Turkey took place, to the neighbourhoods of Berlin where many who travelled the Route settled. We have paid particular attention to nodes of mobility/immobility: self-organized refugee camps, squatted migrant hostels in Athens, or the urban parks of Belgrade, spaces where refugees gathered to regroup, to share information, and, often, to hire movement facilitators. We have attended movement networking events that were initiated to improve transnational collaboration among solidarity initiatives along the

route but also to make the Route known to itself as such. We have gathered oral histories of the journeys that people took to and across Europe. While a range of initiatives and individuals have facilitated or constrained movement along the route, we have focused on events or initiatives that represent key border struggles, that is efforts to open and keep open the route, or to sustain the social reproduction of those along the route. We now turn to two examples of these key border struggles. These two nodes illustrate the varied political practices along the route (that is, the kinds of movements linked, the needs addressed, and their contrasting orientations to politics) as well as divergent experiences of, and relationships with, EU-ropeanization. Although both examples demonstrate, in specific ways, the violence of bordering and nation state-making as well as local and transnational resistance to this violence, each reflects a distinctive intersection of local histories of mobility—and activism around mobility—with the border struggles of those travelling the Balkan Route.

From clandestine to open border-crossing in Preshevë

A small municipality in Southern Serbia, Preshevë did not figure prominently in our initial research plans. After all, our refugee collaborators had not highlighted Preshevë's Macedonian-Serbian border crossing as a site of significant struggles. Their accounts meshed with wider assessments that Serbian policy was relatively welcoming toward people on the move during 2015–2016 because (1) refugees generally intended only to transit the country rather than stay,⁹ (2) Prime Minister Vučić capitalized on the refugee crisis to further Serbia's EU accession efforts, especially in negotiations with Merkel (Milan and Pirro 2018), and, related, (3) his administration attempted to use the presence of refugees to recast Serbia's international reputation, still stained by its bloody role in the dissolution of Yugoslavia, in a more tolerant and 'European' light (Beznec, Speer, and Stojić Mitrović 2016). These arguments, with their national frame of analysis, make clear that Serbia's location as Europe's 'immediate outside' (Jansen 2009) influenced the state's response to refugees in complex and changing ways. But the Route was multiscalar; other dimensions of its opening are brought into relief when, attending to the practices of refugees and activists, we are drawn to look beyond strictly national and inter-national frames.

As we travelled the route, our interest in Preshevë shifted and we began to wonder what we might learn from studying the intersection of the Route with this Albanian-majority town near the borders of both Macedonia and Kosovo. More specifically, we wondered, why had the Route taken such an unusual path in Preshevë? While international trains and highway traffic cross the border within a few hundred metres of each other—and have official international border crossings—almost everyone who travelled the Balkan Route had walked seven kilometres across the fields to cross a 'green border,' i.e., a 'wild' or unofficial crossing, to Miratovac, a village in Preshevë municipality. If Serbia was generally welcoming, why had refugees never been allowed to enter the country at the official crossings? Why, even once the Route formalized into the Corridor, with most refugees buying tickets for trains that quickly transferred them across Macedonian territories, did they nonetheless continue to cross the fields on foot into Serbian territory? Why through this particular village of 1400 residents? In any case, even if there were a simple explanation for the circuitous path, we assumed that Preshevë would offer a compelling opportunity to speak with local volunteers from a Muslim-majority community who

had supported those travelling the Route for reasons that were distinct from those encountered elsewhere.

* * *

Our guide in Preshevë is 'Altin,'¹⁰ an animated man in his early thirties and one of the founders of Youth for Refugees, an organization that activist interlocutors elsewhere along the Route had recommended, praising it as the most effective and, as one Belgrade-based activist put it, the 'least NGO-ized in Southern Serbia,' a compliment that reflected the suspicion with which more radical solidarity activists regard NGOs. Altin meets us at a small café just outside the gates of a former factory that has been converted to a refugee centre run by the Serbian Ministry of Labor and the Commissariat for Refugees—which until only a few years ago was overwhelmed with refugees and internally displaced persons from ex-Yugoslavia rather than global refugees. We drink several coffees before commencing a tour of the municipality's geography of migration.

While we linger in the café, Altin describes how he became involved in the 'refugee crisis' on a night when he was out late with 'Sabri' at a small strip of cafés not far from the central mosque in Preshevë Town. They saw a group of about fifteen people gathered near the mosque and Altin noticed that they were exhausted and dusty from travel. The women were wearing headscarves, 'so I knew they were from our religious community, not that that means much to me.' But when Altin went to the imam of the central mosque, the imam didn't care to help them. 'So, I threatened him,' Altin laughs, 'saying I'd knock down the door of the mosque and let them in myself if he wouldn't, even if it meant I'd have to pay for the door the next day.' The imam relented and hosted the group, but by Altin's description the cool response that first evening was typical of many imams, who were not so welcoming to refugees, and certainly, Altin emphasized, none have been as helpful as the imam of Miratovac, the small village about 5 km south of the central mosque.

Altin related how, not long after this incident, refugees started coming in larger numbers, as many as one hundred per day. With Serbian police not allowing them through at official crossings, people walked from Macedonia across the fields toward the minaret of Miratovac's mosque, he explained. As the number of arrivals grew, Altin, Sabri, and two other friends founded Youth for Refugees.¹¹ 'We all had our own experiences of being refugees, of being driven from our homes, so we knew what we had to do when they came,' Altin said. With Youth for Refugees, Altin drew on kin, friends, and political connections from his earlier work for a local human rights organization, where he had been dedicated to protecting the rights of the 70,000 minority Albanians who live outside but adjacent to Kosovo¹² in Southern Serbia.

At first, Youth for Refugees helped refugees meet their most urgent needs: water, food, the distribution of blankets and shoes, etc. Pretty quickly, however, a vibrant market arose to provide for most of the refugees' needs. The efforts of Youth for Refugees turned then to ensuring that those providing services did not 'abuse' refugees. 'I don't mind if people make money. That's totally fine,' Altin conceded, acknowledging a long history of smuggling in Preshevë, especially during international sanctions against Serbia in the 1990s when all internationally produced goods, notably gasoline, had to be smuggled into the country. 'But people could make a lot of money charging the normal rates [to refugees],' Altin insisted, 'they didn't need to charge exploitative prices.' Youth for Refugees used several strategies to combat the 'abuse' of refugees passing through Preshevë. First,

they made fliers with basic orientation information that included expected prices for services such as taxis to local destinations or buses onward to Belgrade and the Hungarian border so that 'refugees would be able to challenge unfair drivers and negotiate their way forward.' They distributed tens of thousands of fliers as people crossed the border and coordinated with *Legis*, the most active solidarity and advocacy organization on the Macedonian side of the border, so that this information circulated even before refugees crossed into Serbia. Second, and especially when they heard about *krijumčarenje*,¹³ or trafficking, they would go and challenge those who were involved, even their neighbours. 'How can you do this? Don't you remember that we all fled across those same fields?' Altin would ask, referencing the experience of Albanians fleeing the Serbian military at the start of armed conflict in 1999, when the residents of Preshevë fled south across the fields toward Albanian villages in Macedonia, the very fields that the new refugees had begun crossing on their way *northward* in 2015.¹⁴ As we came to know him better, Altin would tell us that he was only fourteen when the Yugoslav Army arrived and he fled with his mother and sister. When the rhetoric of refugee solidarity was ineffective, or when the Serbian mafia became involved in the area, Altin described a different approach, and his exact wording is telling here of his attitudes toward the official representatives of the Serbian state. 'When I heard about trafficking, I didn't call the police. I solved the problem peacefully. I talked to them one on one.' When we asked him to say more, Altin replied, 'I'll leave it at that.'

The next day we follow a small road out of Preshevë to the south, crossing a few kilometres of fields before entering the small and densely built village of Miratovac. We sit at a plastic table and chairs in a café across a clearing of grass and rutted earth from the village mosque. Altin explains that this café was built to serve refugees. We chat for perhaps half an hour when Altin stands and greets a passerby who appears to be in his late sixties. We are introduced to the imam of Miratovac. Altin presents us as researchers interested in 'the refugees' and we apologize for not knowing Albanian. The imam agrees, graciously, to continue in Serbian. With pride, he describes how he helped create a reception centre for refugees in the late spring of 2015. 'Right here,' he says, gesturing toward the clearing between the café and the mosque, 'with water and power connections from our mosque.' With help from Doctors Without Borders (MSF) they later expanded the centre to provide urgent medical care. Bearing in mind the religious motivations of some Christian volunteers we had encountered elsewhere on the Route, we ask if their support was religiously motivated. The imam, a bit taken aback, insists he never thought of their welcome for the refugees as religiously motivated. 'It was our community's response to the needs of the people who found themselves in our village. We never differentiated among the people. We helped Africans, even some Chinese, no matter their faith.' Altin gently interjects that the imam was among the first in the Preshevë Valley to be aware of the refugees. Yes, the imam nods with a slight smile. We cannot tell if he is being modest, or is reluctant to speak further on this point. Many Muslims in post-Yugoslavia are cautious, given the history of surveillance and repression in the region (Rexhepi 2018, 2). But after a brief pause, he proceeds:

Yes, I welcomed refugees for more than a year before the trickle swelled to a river. In the beginning we welcomed small groups, a few families at a time, usually not more than ten to fifteen per day[...] When there were more than we could accommodate at the mosque,

we would spread people out to various houses in Miratovac. There was never difficulty finding space [for them in local homes]; more than half of our people are abroad, almost all working in Switzerland. So, I got permission to shelter these people, gave them a chance for a hot shower and dry bed for a change[...] Only when the numbers increased to more than 100 per day did we open the reception center. Before that, and sometimes even after, I was afraid the police would try to say I was smuggling, rather than only sheltering those in need.

‘And the road?’ Altin prompts the imam again. ‘Oh, the road,’ again hesitant, but only for a moment.

Well when the rains came in later September and October, and thousands a day were now crossing the fields, they were walking through deep mud. Each day it got worse. So, I brought together all the landowners affected after Friday prayers, even a few from the Macedonian side, all those whose fields were being crossed, and received their permission to turn the dirt track into a road ... Then I coordinated with MSF, which delivered truckloads of gravel ... We had a village work action to complete the road.

‘So, you built the road? An international road, on your own?’ we ask incredulously. ‘Yes, but this is not strange for us. We have built our own roads, our own schools, for decades. The [Serbian] state,’ the imam insisted, ‘does little for us,’ referencing Albanian traditions of self-organization and local autonomy that were part of a wider non-violent resistance to Serbian nationalism within Yugoslavia, especially following the rise of Slobodan Milošević to power after 1987 (Pula 2004).

But, how, we ask, returning to one of our initial puzzles, did refugees first find their way here? Why didn’t they cross closer to the train tracks? The imam shrugs. ‘They must have walked toward the minaret, knowing they would be cared for here. I don’t know.’ Altin follows up on our question with another for the imam: ‘But you were already in contact with many Syrians before this all started, right?’ ‘Oh, yes,’ the imam agrees. ‘I have a long history with Syria. I did my theological training in the time of the Non-Aligned Movement in Syria. I lived there for eight years, learned Arabic, even experienced the first uprising against Assad in 1981.’ And you stayed in touch?

Oh, yes. I’ve stayed in touch. And I teach my community, and other imams in the area when possible, about the revolution against Assad, so that they understand why these refugees have to flee now, and why we are encountering them in our little village.

The imam’s statements, as well as his own transnational training and networks, affirm Henig’s observation, based on research with Dervish networks in post-Yugoslavia, that there are ‘enduring forms of historical imagination and cosmopolitan sensibilities that span the borders of states, nationalities, and languages,’ (2016, 909). Toward the end of our conversation with the imam we ask, why didn’t the Serbian police ever close the border here? The imam shrugs, turning toward Altin. He also shrugs. ‘Who knows?’ Altin says with a smile.

As we walk from the village centre southward, the houses are more widely separated from one another. Soon we are past the last farmhouses, out into flat agricultural land to the south of Miratovac. We stroll a few hundred metres along the gravel road—the imam’s road—and the wide Preshevë Valley opens before us. To our right we can see the hills of southeastern Kosovo. Straight ahead of us lies Macedonia, indistinguishable from Serbia, with no physical barrier separating the two former Yugoslav states, though further off to our left we can see the infrastructure of the train and highway border

crossings. Still further left, to the east, we can see other predominantly Albanian villages on both sides of the border, their minarets distinguishing them from Orthodox Christian villages. All in all, we can see six minarets from this spot in the open fields, including the ruins of an Ottoman-era mosque in Macedonia. But somehow 1.2 million people found their way to the village of Miratovac.

* * *

It is only when we return a few months later for a second more extended visit to Preshevë that Altin tells us more about how the borders were kept open. We are several hours into our afternoon conversation with Altin and 'Nouran,' a Syrian-Serbian woman raised between Belgrade and Damascus whose own history of migration led her to travel to Preshevë to volunteer with refugees. Nouran comments that the people of Preshevë played a pivotal role in improving the situation of refugees in Serbia. We ask if they played a role in how the police treated the refugees. Why was Serbia the only country that never drove refugees underground, the only state that never fully closed the border (at least until later, when all the borders across Southeastern Europe closed again in March of 2016 following the EU-Turkey deal)? Altin answers the question with a question of his own: 'Where's the border they'd need to close? How can they close it?' 'Wait,' we respond, 'say more.' 'Well,' Altin begins,

you know when the Macedonians closed the border, what was it, in August of 2015? Thousands of people quickly found themselves at the border trying to cross and the Macedonian police beat them ... In Preshevë they can't beat the refugees, the people would fight them. Serbia is so proud about how it has treated the refugees, right?¹⁵

Yes, we acknowledge. Altin continues, describing the public representation of the refugee crisis in Serbia, where as Stojić Mitrović has argued, state officials saw the Balkan Route as an opportunity to counter the persistent negative world image of Serbia following the wars of Yugoslav succession (2016). 'Last time I didn't think I could tell this story,' Altin says finally, 'but now I don't care. The reason Serbia responded so gently to the refugees is because of us, because of the Albanians in Southern Serbia.' Altin goes on to explain that this is because of informal power-sharing agreements, and de facto Albanian autonomy that was agreed to after the armed hostilities of 1998–2001. Many have argued that it was the failure of nonviolent resistance efforts, including self-organized autonomy, that led Albanians across the border in Kosovo to turn to armed resistance in the late 1990s, which led to war, NATO intervention, and the current state of partially recognized Kosovo independence (Kubo 2010). Notably the postwar agreements included arrangements for joint Serbian-Albanian police patrols in Southern Serbia, and a ban on major police or military operations in the area without equal Albanian participation. 'And these Albanian policemen, they are my friends,' Altin adds, 'so [The Serbian police] could not close the border. It's not theirs to close.'

Closing the corridor

But, despite Altin's bravado, the Macedonian-Serbian border, like others along the Route was eventually closed. The process of choking off the Balkan Corridor began in November 2015, following the Paris attacks, when French-born militants assaulted the Bataclan concert hall, leaving a planted Syrian passport and ninety dead in their wake. The

attacks gave authorities the pretext they needed to begin to discipline the Route within a framework of securitization: refugees as terrorists. The event was used to justify restricting travel along the route to all but Syrians, Iraqis, and Afghans (or those able to successfully impersonate them): other nationalities became immobilized at whatever point in the Corridor they found themselves. Then, in February, the EU declared Afghanistan ‘safe,’ and began excluding Afghans from the Corridor. Meanwhile, the political climate in Germany was changing in the wake of media reports of ‘migrant mobs’ sexually assaulting German women in Cologne during New Year’s celebrations. A moral panic now accompanied the securitarian justification for closure: migrants as sexual predators (De Genova 2017). In this new public context, Angela Merkel negotiated what came to be called the EU-Turkey deal, authorizing mass deportations from Greece to Turkey. Substantial payments to Turkey and promised steps toward EU accession, hinged on Turkish authorities accepting those deported and committing to the disruption of refugees’ Aegean Sea departures at a time when Turkey hosted approximately three million Syrians.

Immediately following the agreement, states all along the Route took steps to limit refugees’ mobility. Slovenia, the northernmost republic to emerge from former Yugoslavia, took the first action to close the Balkan Corridor definitively, likely under pressure from Austria. In shutting border crossings, closing the Corridor, and erecting razor wire along the entirety of its border with Croatia, Slovenia emulated parts of the Hungarian model from the previous summer. Slovenia’s actions created a chain reaction southward and eastward, with one state after another following suit, afraid that if they did not, thousands of refugees—lacking the ability to travel onward—would quickly accumulate on their territory. Soon there were reports of violent and illegal pushbacks from Croatia, Hungary, Serbia, and Bulgaria, as states tried to slow and even reverse the directionality of travel, or render travel so miserable as to be a deterrent (Belgrade Center For Human Rights and Macedonian Young Lawyers Association 2017). In the dozens of narratives we gathered from refugees, as well as in accounts documented by Border Violence Monitoring, these pushbacks consistently included violent beatings, the theft of money and (or destruction of) mobile phones, and transportation to ‘green borders’ where refugees were forced to walk back to the country south or east of the one where they had been caught by police (2018). ‘Abdul,’ a former US military interpreter in Kandahar, for example, reported experiencing more than a dozen violent pushbacks from Hungarian and Croatian territory, including one from Zagreb when he went to file for asylum at the central police station—300 km from the border. What is more, Turkey took steps, including shootings at the border, to violently close off the flight of Syrians (Human Rights Watch 2016).¹⁶ As ‘Ana,’ a Slovene activist put it,

Western Europe is just exporting their border violence to us. They don’t have to carry out these pushbacks and border enforcement because our states do it for them. They get to just remain bureaucratic ... and the Balkans remain the cruel ones.

The opening and closing of the route across Slovenia

In the Preshevë section we looked at the role of local activists in the opening of the Route at one of its nodes—the Macedonian-Serbian border. We now turn to Second Home, an initiative in Ljubljana, to examine the Route’s closure and specifically, activists’ work

with people who found themselves for a longer period in Slovenia. By the time of the abrupt series of closures that began after the EU-Turkey deal in March 2016, approximately 600 refugees found themselves on Slovenian territory, some of whom applied for asylum while others chose to remain clandestine, hoping to avoid documentation that might be used in Dublin deportations should they succeed in travelling onward.¹⁷ Just as in Preševë, the history of previous movements—in both senses of the word—was crucial to how both local activists and people on the move responded to the Route, shaping both the Route and its eventual closure in Slovenia. As Polona, a long-time activist and legal expert who was involved in the activities of Second Home put it, ‘the knowledge and also the methodologies of those earlier migration struggles have informed everything we’ve done [since the closure of the route].’ We briefly review that longer history, a prime example of how activist innovation and experimentation is dependent on sedimented histories (Kurtović and Sargsyan this issue), before tracing the shift from a primary engagement in struggles for freedom of movement to struggles for the ‘right to stay’ and forms of grassroots integration.

With EU membership and the highest per capita income of any formerly socialist state, Slovenia is often held up as a transition success story. After all, Slovenia is exceptional among Yugoslav successor states in being a member of both the Schengen zone of border-free EU travel and the Eurozone of the single EU currency. The struggles of Slovenia’s minorities—primarily those from other former Yugoslav republics—cast its recently gained statehood in a different light, however, and help us to understand the support for the Route offered by local activists. Following Yugoslavia’s collapse, the formation of an independent and ethnically defined state, and accession to the European Union, citizenship and migration became the most politically charged issues in Slovenia. Since independence, public conflicts have erupted around a series of migrant populations: pre-independence migrants from elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia protesting their removal from the register of permanent residents, displaced Bosnians fleeing war who sought full international protection, asylum seekers pushing for greater freedom of movement pending their hearings, undocumented migrants denouncing their detention conditions, and migrant workers with a range of statuses objecting to labour abuses. In each of these conflicts, migrants found allies in a network of radical activists in Slovenia who challenged the dominant anti-migrant politics of this period, and who cultivated a strongly antinationalist and transnational movement. Social Center Rog, a squatted former bicycle factory in Ljubljana, was a hub for a variety of these earlier struggles and for responses to the Route.

Following the signing of the EU-Turkey deal, Rog saw swelling numbers of participants in its regular Refugee Assemblies. Aigul, a longtime research collaborator, made a hotly contested intervention at the monthly Assembly of the Users of the Autonomous Factory Rog, which governs the whole complex, home to dozens of initiatives. Aigul and a dozen refugees were (reluctantly) allowed to take over a structure within the complex, which soon became Second Home. The new facility hosted a variety of refugee services, many of them run by refugees themselves. Activities ranged from a legal clinic to refugee poetry nights and were understood by organizers as a kind of grassroots and self-organized integration of refugees into Slovenia’s capital city.¹⁸

Second home: 'Migrants of all statuses, unite!'

A week after visiting Preshevë, we travelled to Ljubljana for the closing day of the Transnational Social Strike (TSS) meetings. While Second Home had been amongst the activist collectives most committed to transnational networking along the Balkan Route—sending contingents to previous migrant solidarity meetings in Berlin, Bologna, Budapest, Thessaloniki and the Croatian-Slovene border—this was the first international meeting they had organized and hosted themselves. TSS describes itself as a 'platform' that serves as a transnational infrastructure, bringing different movements across Europe into dialogues at its meetings. Providing food, lodging, meeting planning and organizing, as well as securing contributions from wealthier Swiss and German collectives to subsidize the travel of those attending from Hungary, Serbia and Croatia was daunting for this relatively new and majority refugee organization. In the end—due to delays at the border no less—we miss the earlier workshops on Freedom of Movement and the Right to Stay, Logistics Labor, Migrant and/or Precarious Labor, and the Global Women's Strike, arriving when the final plenary is in session at Rog. Over forty people sit in a large circle, half of whom are intermittently smoking hand-rolled cigarettes.

When we arrive, the conversation centres on the transnational dimensions of the Route, but Aigul soon shifts the conversation back to issues specific to Second Home. She describes how Second Home was built at the intersection of, on the one hand, 'local resistance to Slovene nationalism,' and its 'violent exclusion of migrants,' and on the other hand, the 'transformative presence and new needs of the people traveling the Balkan Route.' A short, dynamic organizer, Aigul knows of what she speaks. A migrant herself from Kyrgyzstan, she came to Slovenia fifteen years ago. She says she was motivated to leave Kyrgyzstan both by a desire to escape the narrowly defined role for women at home, as well as a wish to travel and see the world. She nonetheless sees her 'tribal, Muslim, and strongly Communist family' and community upbringing as influencing her style of political organizing, though she attributes her politicization to the 'education' she received through radical activist networks across Europe from the alterglobalization movements of the early 2000s forward, which were tightly woven into migrant struggles in Slovenia. Until recently securing a modest salary through a grant to support migrant integration activity, Aigul's primary income came from the tours she led for wealthy Russian tourists visiting Slovenia. A fiery orator, Aigul exhorts the plenary to fight to reopen the Balkan Route. Raising her voice, she says, 'We won't accept push-backs, we need push-forwards!'

Mirza, in his early sixties, watches the proceedings diffidently as he tends to the hotplate in the bar area just outside the circle. He is preparing pot after pot of Turkish coffee, which is passed around the circle so everyone can fill their small plastic cups. The interior of Rog is wallpapered with posters, fliers and large-format photos, a palimpsest of the social struggles of the past eleven years of its squatted existence. Mirza himself has seen it all, including erasure, a form of bureaucratic ethnic cleansing.

The self-described Erased (*izbrisani*) illustrate the troubling qualities of the ethnonationalist citizenship and democracy that have emerged in Slovenia (and much of the region) with the dismantling of Yugoslavia and distinctive socialism. But the experience of the Erased, and their allies in political organizing, also provides an important background against which the radical organizing around the Balkan Route developed. The 'erasure' refers to the 1992 removal of more than 25,000 people—primarily those born

in other Yugoslav republics—from the register of permanent residents shortly after Slovenia’s declaration of independence. Erasure transformed many of those affected into ‘illegal migrants’ overnight in a territory where they had lived legally for decades or, in some cases, had been born (Blitz 2006). Along with legal residence, the Erased lost medical care, work permits, pensions, even the ability to obtain a driving license or travel outside Slovenia. Mirza lost his pension and the opportunity to purchase his apartment under favourable privatization terms. He now resides in a space near the main hall in Social Center Rog, runs the bar, and serves as guardian and caretaker of the space.

Later that evening everyone gathers to eat under the watchful eyes of Second Home’s murals: Malcom X, the Zapatistas, Che Guevara, Assata Shakur, and Komandant Stane, a Slovene volunteer to the Spanish Civil War and a World War II antifascist partisan. The meal is prepared by several Iranians who hope to turn their food service experience at Second Home into a catering business. We settle into conversation with two poets and Second Home regulars, Mustafa and Helmi, who together have organized Migrant Literature Out Loud! in Second Home and a series of poetry readings on Radio Študent. In his late sixties, Mustafa is from Mosul. Helmi is a Palestinian-Syrian from Aleppo in his mid-fifties who has recently completed a collection of poetry in Arabic, with English and Slovene translations to come. The volume is comprised of sixteen poems portraying women activists, ‘solidarians’ he met on his ‘haunting journey’ from Syria to Slovenia. When Aigul comes over to join us, she’s boisterous, clearly relieved to have the organizational burdens of the meetings successfully behind her. She exchanges hugs with both men. Helmi says sheepishly that one poem in the collection is about Aigul. Aigul smiles and roars a loud, ‘arrh,’ giving him another hug. Turning serious, she says, *this* is as important as any of our political meetings. This? Socializing together. Eating together. Becoming friends.

Aigul’s comments are echoed in an interview later that week. We meet at a bar a few blocks from Rog, and are ushered by the Afghan bartender into a back storeroom so we can audio record in a quiet spot. Sitting among stacked cases of beer, Aigul says that building friendships across all these social divides is as important as resisting deportations and grassroots integration, and ‘probably the foundation for all our other work.’ ‘I mean, I only became an activist,’ she adds, ‘because I came to be so close to this group of people trying to make a different world. So, yeah, love is as important as our political understanding for this activism.’ Later, walking along the Ljubljana River from Factory Rog toward the centre, Aigul will also add, however, that work with migrants always has a bittersweet quality. ‘You make such close friends, you form such tight bonds, but so many people can’t find the conditions they need to make new lives in Slovenia and they move on. Or, they are moved on by the state.’

* * *

Despite legal assistance from Second Home the Korba-Suleimani family had exhausted all procedural means with which to oppose their removal from Slovenian territory under the Dublin Regulation. On March 22 2017 a secret order to deport the family is executed. Karol Korba and her husband Hani Sulejman had first flown to Zagreb, Croatia on tourist visas a few months earlier and joined the Corridor. They were arrested, however, at the border and placed in the Vič Asylum Home. Korba, who was nine months pregnant, soon gave birth. By mid-March with deportation looming, Korba’s physicians objected to her removal on medical grounds: she was suffering from acute post-partum depression. Through contacts in the asylum home, Second Home activists learn of the scheduled

deportation. Local activists now stand shoulder to shoulder with Afghans, Iranians, and Tunisians—thirty-five people in all—to block the gate as a police van carrying the family tries to exit the facility. As they jostle with police, one activist presses his body against the grill of the van so it cannot move forward. He is suddenly dragged behind the line of police, and arrested despite protesters' efforts to grab him as he is dragged away. In the midst of this conflict, Aigul holds back an Afghan refugee who has grabbed the arm of a policeman raising his baton to strike a protester. She knew, she says later, that any legal infraction would mean deportation for him too. Despite protesters' resistance, a few hours later the large white van is on the highway headed southeast to the Croatian border. Following the action, participants will be fined and banned from visiting their friends who are housed in Slovenian asylum centres. Aigul, however, drafts a defiant statement on behalf of Second Home, which ends with their slogan, echoing *The Communist Manifesto*: Migrants of all Statuses, Unite!

Conclusion

While some key aspects of the Route can be explicated in terms of national identity, history, or policy, such analytic frames tend to overlook the importance of 'enduring trans-regional flows and circulation of people, things and ideas across the region and into the wider world' (Henig 2016, 910). By instead attending to the perspective of refugees and activists, especially those who claimed freedom of movement, we highlight the transnational flows and the local nodes of the dimensions of the Route. In Preshevë alone, we encounter the afterlives of socialist internationalism and the Non-Aligned Movement, as well as vibrant transnational networks of Islamic training, diasporic Albanian politics, global humanitarianism, and local smuggling traditions. Similarly, our attention to people on the move brings into focus the layering of movement upon movement (as migration). Altin fled war with his family, seeking refuge in Macedonia like hundreds of thousands of Albanians from Southern Serbia and Kosovo. This experience, shared by many of the villagers, affected his response to the newer refugees, both motivating his actions and serving as a powerful trope that could be deployed to support welcome rather than exclusion. What is more, Yugoslav Albanians have departed one of the continent's poorest regions to work in Switzerland, Germany, or the wealthier republics of Yugoslavia, including Slovenia, for decades before they were acknowledged as refugees. When the Route reached Preshevë, the homes of this diaspora could be repurposed, voluntarily (or for a fee) to shelter those crossing Southern Serbia. Previous migrations therefore influenced not only local responses to people on the move, but the physical infrastructure of the Route.

But the layering of movements upon movements (as activism) was nearly as rich along the Route as that of migration. Clearly, as Kurtović and Sargsyan argue, the postsocialist world should not be caricatured as some kind of 'ground zero for authoritarian encroachment and the growing ascendancy of reactionary values and political forms' (this issue), but also hosts a wide range of social movements struggling to envision and enact other possible futures. In just these two nodes of ex-Yugoslav activism (Preshevë and Second Home) we see the participation of anarchists, autonomist Marxists, local Albanian autonomists, alterglobalists, labour and migrant rights activists, the Erased, a capillary web of transnational networking to coordinate a movement of movements, as well as

humanitarian, religious, and more radical ‘solidarian’ aid initiatives serving refugees, etc. Our findings also challenge the descriptive and analytic tendency to hold these two senses of movement—as migration and as activism—apart.

First, the distinction between activists and refugees, which we too use as a shorthand, is blurred by figures like Altin, Aigul, the imam of Miratovac, Mustafa, and Helmi, or the young Afghan who grabbed the policeman’s arm as he lowered his baton on a fellow protester. This refugee-activist conjunction should be unsurprising; many refugees had their own histories of politicization, from the varied strands of the Arab Spring across the Middle East and North Africa to the ongoing movement of anarchist-inflected Kurdish autonomy in Rojava. Others have been politicized by their experiences at the hands of the authorities all along the Route, or through encounters and collaboration with European activists in the squats of Athens, Thessaloniki, or Ljubljana. For those like Altin, Aigul, and the imam of Miratovac, their own histories of movement shaped their activism along the Route. We must, therefore, critically interrogate the figure of the activist from the vantage point of our distinctive ethnographic sites (Kurtović and Sargsyan this issue). In the case of the Route, such interrogation both challenges an easy distinction between refugees and activists but also, by extension, subverts common representations of refugees as passive recipients of aid, forcing us to recognize them as political actors in their own right.

The Route, in other words, may demand that we recognize what those in the autonomy of migration literature have insisted (Bojadžijev and Karakayali 2010; Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013): ‘migration is a genuine social force: in their aggregate, these myriad impulses, dreams, acts of refusal, escape and trespassing change the world’ (Walters 2015, 483). The struggle to move, or to stay, regardless of bordering practices, is the most elemental of border struggles, an active struggle we see across all nodes of the Route. Most fundamentally, earlier clandestine mobility served as the very foundation of the Route. As the number of people on the move expanded, they enacted the kinds of actions that we more traditionally recognize as activism—protests, chants, demands, and direct actions against the borders, as in the March of Hope.

But to return to the specificities of the two nodes we examine here, what can be made of the Balkan Route’s dynamic interaction with the territory of ex-Yugoslavia, the new states forged in the ‘Balkan Wars?’ We argue that the Route intersects with the lingering effects of the violent processes of state formation that we see in Serbia and Slovenia—what we have argued is better understood as their Europeanization rather than as ‘primitive Balkanism.’ In Preshevë and Second Home, we see the ongoing consequences of violent nation-state formation: new borders, newly hegemonic national communities, and their concomitant ethnic exclusions. And across Europe, the Balkan Route presents opportunities for a resurgent populist far right to rearticulate visions of Europe as *Antemurale Christianitatis*, the defense walls of Christendom against the barbarians, just as Croatian, Slovenian, and Serbian nationalist did in the course of state formation.

While we find these violent processes of nation-state making, we also find political resistance to the exclusions of these new states. In Southern Serbia, minority ethnic Albanians who responded to the rise of Serbian nationalism by creating forms of localized autonomy that have variously been characterized as ‘non-violent strategies’ and ‘parallel structures’ (Pula 2004) or an underground resistance movements (Luci 2012). To be sure, with their ethno-national framing these political forms are quite different in their structure, and their political imaginary, than the radical transnationalism of Second Home.

First, Kosovar Albanians' national struggle was in many regards an anticolonial struggle, which, as Frantz Fanon insists, brings its own contradictions but should not be conflated with colonizing nationalism (2005). What is more, because of the specific conditions in Pre-shevë, the demands of the Albanians with whom we spoke, primarily those active around the Route, did not include Albanian sovereignty, which likely appeared unattainable for such a small minority outside of Kosovo proper. Many, including Altin, continued to identify with the tradition of nonviolent resistance associated with Rugova, and spoke dismissively of Kosovo Liberation Army figures—who led the turn from nonviolent to military resistance—especially in their postwar political and business careers, as 'war profiteers.' Strikingly, Altin and others called for a freedom of movement not only for themselves vis-à-vis the relatively new international borders with Macedonia and Kosovo—which separated them from friends and family—but for all those travelling the Route.

Against the backdrop of the region's history of communal violence—but also against Europe's history of global violence, and more specifically toward those currently seeking safety on the continent—the transnational organizing and interethnic cooperation along the Route stand as stark counter-examples. Perhaps Second Home most exemplifies what Greenberg and Spasić describe as citizens and refugees 'creating new kinds of solidarity politics in the interstices of alternately securitized and absent states' (2017, 315). Rather than calling for the reinforcement of borders, and the separation of ethnic communities, as nationalists so often do, those active at Second Home demanded the opening of the borders, even the outright abolition of migration controls. When faced with the violent closure of the border, and the slowing of refugees' forward migration, the activists of Second Home shifted from an emphasis on freedom of movement toward a 'right to stay.' This included resisting deportations and legal counseling, but also making, well, a new home for those who found themselves in Ljubljana. This was done through forms of grassroots integration—language classes, cultural programming, and new friendships—much of it organized and directed by refugees themselves. Of course, we cannot romanticize relations at Second Home because, as Aigul herself pointed out, 'refugees are as racist as everyone else and they are further divided by all the different statuses that have been imposed on them.' Nonetheless, we can see in both facets of Second Home's work, the right to stay and grassroots integration, a third front of border struggles, one that all migrants must take up when their forward movement is arrested or they reach their destinations: the struggle against the borders, formal and informal, that continue to constrain them from leading the life they hope to lead. As our ability to sustain superior Western distance from 'the Balkans' is eroded by what Kurtović and Sargsyan describe as 'reorganized and revitalized right movements' in Europe and the US, it is indeed all the more urgent to question 'whether new, less exclusionary and livable worlds, can be produced out of the wreckages of our political present' (this issue). One place we can turn for such prefigurative politics is in the alternative social relations modelled in border struggles along the Balkan Route.

Notes

1. The terms refugee and migrant, among others (e.g. asylum-seeker, irregular migrant, undocumented migrant, etc.), carry moral, legal, and political meanings and the choice of terminology has consequences for how people on the move are received, treated, and understood. To stay true to studying the route from below, we use terms most used by activists and travellers

along the route: refugee or, in an effort to move beyond state-centric legal terminology, simply 'people on the move.' We use different terms only when directly quoting others.

2. We use Preshevë, the Albanian name of the town—rather than the Serbian Preševo—because we spoke primarily with Albanians and focus on Albanian initiatives in this majority Albanian municipality.
3. We refer here to the wars of Yugoslav succession, which were often called 'Balkan' in media representations that re-animated a dormant Balkanist discourse, rather than to the earlier Balkan Wars of 1912–1913.
4. See Kingsley's *The New Odyssey* (2016) for an exemplary journalistic account of the 'refugee crisis.'
5. See Tazzioli (2017) on migrant multiplicities and their policing and segmentation.
6. See Cabot (2014) for the social and institutional consequences of these rules in Greece.
7. For a time, the Route also travelled through Croatian territory to its border with Hungary until that too was fenced.
8. These hierarchical relationships with the EU range from Slovenia's full membership in the EU and Eurozone, through Croatia's acceptance with pending accession to the Schengen zone of borderless travel, and Serbia and Montenegro's applicant status, with no accession on the horizon, to Kosovo and Macedonia which have yet to achieve even recognition of their statehood from all member-states of the EU. Bosnia has perhaps the most contradictory relationship to the EU. On the one hand, the ethnically divided state is an international protectorate over which the EU holds decisive power. On the other hand, its citizens are treated as 'third country nationals'—as if they are from states with no relationship with the European Union—affording them no freedom to live and work within the EU itself.
9. For more on Serbian state practices of managing this unusual transit status, including its 72-hour permit, see Beznec, Speer, and Stojić Mitrović (2016).
10. All pseudonyms are introduced in quotation marks. Those who preferred we use their real names are introduced without quotation marks.
11. For more on Youth for Refugees as well as a more detailed account of the migrant crossings into Serbia, see Stojić Mitrović (2016, 200–211).
12. Kosovo with its Albanian majority declared independence from Serbia in 2008 but enjoys only partial international recognition.
13. While many Albanians in the Preshevë area were unable or unwilling to speak Serbian with us, not surprisingly given the long and repressive history of Serbian domination in Southern Serbia and neighbouring Kosovo, Altin spoke with us in both Serbian and English.
14. Rexhepi cites similar questions about hospitality among ethnic Albanians in Macedonia toward Kosovar Albanians in 1999 as compared to refugees in 2015 (2018, 14).
15. For more on this closure see Beznec, Speer, and Stojić Mitrović (2016, 19–20) or for comprehensive coverage for the border struggles at the Idomeni/Gevgelija border crossing see Anastasiadou et al's *From Transit Hub to Dead End: A Chronicle of Idomeni*, (2017).
16. In March–April 2016, Turkey reportedly killed five Syrians attempting to flee the war for Turkish territory, including a child. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/05/10/turkey-border-guards-kill-and-injure-asylum-seekers>
17. Others had made their way to Slovenia by a dozen other paths and methods and they embodied almost every possible migration status.
18. Aigul conceded that she made a 'brutal' argument for why refugees deserved the space more than the anarchist-led urban gardening collective. This initial conflict over space played a part in subsequent conflicts that eventually saw Second Home evicted by other Rog activists in the spring of 2018. Clearly relations between refugees and activists cannot be romanticized and often also involve conflicts, just as there are conflicts within refugee and activist communities.

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