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Fragments of Queer Mobility

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This text contributes to the mapping of migration processes and experiences of queer individuals by employing examples from Croatia and the post-Yugoslav region of recent decades. It aims to bespeak lesser exposed narratives within the larger body of work on migratory movements and regimes, and the politics regulating them. To that end, I will utilize outputs from the research that I have done for the project "Good Luck! Migration Today. Vienna, Belgrade, Zagreb, Istanbul" (2007–2010, Initiative Minderheiten), [1] which also included queer and activist perspectives within the migration discourse that was analyzed. I will also use selected points from articles and interviews produced by Gabrijela Ivanov (2014–2015, voxfeminae.net) that focus on (e)migration experiences of queer activists from the post-Yugoslav region.

The social and political reality of that area is, to varying degrees in regards to a particular country and time period, characterized by patriarchal orders, nationalism and xenophobia, homophobia, and heterosexism, the strong influence of churches, political repression, and a lack of implementation of laws. Nevertheless, it is a space in which gradual but significant steps have been taken in the last 25 years for ensuring rights and improving the living conditions of its LGBTIQ population – again with different success rates for each of

the regional states. The accomplished changes were the result of the intensive lobbying and advocacy of civil society actors as well as the states' responses to the requirements of the accession processes to European Union institutions and associations. Whereas those processes have advanced the rights of LGBTIQ persons, at least at the nominal level of adopted laws and regulations, the actual homophobia-in-the-field was often used in the construction of narratives of those regional countries as being backwards and barbaric versus the "developed" and "progressive" western societies of EU states, of course omitting the facts of homophobic instances also present in that “civilized world.”

Although the achievements of the LGBTIQ movements in the regional countries differ in regards to the existing level of legal protection and rights, they share the same roots of feminist, lesbian, and gay organizing during the 1980s in Yugoslavia, and trans-regional peace and anti-war activism and solidarity in the 1990s. After the historical international conference “Comrade Woman. Women’s Question: A New Approach?” that took place in Belgrade in 1978, women's and feminist groups started to organize during the early 1980s in Ljubljana, Zagreb, and Belgrade. The first gay and lesbian groups in Yugoslavia were founded in Ljubljana as sections of the Student Cultural Center: the gay section Magnus in 1984[2] and ŠKUC-LL in 1987. The lesbian section LL was part of a feminist group Lilith, which organized the first Yugoslav feminist meeting in Ljubljana in 1987. That event was instrumental for further feminist lesbian organizing during the next three years in Ljubljana (ŠKUC-LL), Zagreb (Lila Initiative), and Belgrade (a lesbian section of the feminist group Women and Society, and a gay and lesbian group Arkadija). But parallel to those beginnings of lesbian and gay organizing, the state of Yugoslavia began its process of disintegration.

During the 1990s, feminists in Zagreb and Belgrade were deeply involved in anti-war activism through public protests and campaigns, direct work, support, and help provided to women survivors of war and violence. After the end of the wars of the Yugoslav succession, new lesbian organizations formed in Belgrade (Labris, 1995) and Zagreb (Kontra, 1997). However, before that, in 1992, the same year that the Republic of Croatia was internationally recognized, LIGMA – Lesbian and Gay Men Action, the first Croatian gay and lesbian organization, was established in Zagreb with the support of the Transnational Radical Party. LIGMA was led by Amir Hanušić and Andreja Špehar, the first two Croatian activists that were publicly out, and also the ones who, because of instances of societal homophobia and state repression, were forced or decided to leave their home countries. Špehar emigrated to Sweden, and Hanušić, after numerous verbal assaults, harassment by police, and a physical attack on him and his home, left for Canada where he was granted asylum in 1998.

In the 2000s, trans-regional communication and collaboration between LGBTIQ activists started to develop around Pride marches and queer festivals. The extremely violent attack on people gathering for the first Belgrade Pride in 2001 directly propelled the organization of the first Pride march in Zagreb the following year, with some of the organizers bearing the experience of the Belgrade attempt. In 2003, the Southeastern European Queer (SEEQ) Network was created connecting LGBTIQ activists and organizations from the former Yugoslav republics. The intension to shape the space of queer solidarity and exchange outside states' imposed national borders was clearly visible in the flyers announcing that the first Queer Belgrade festival[3] held in 2004 would take place at the imaginary location of “Belgrade,

Queeroslavia."[4] The efforts taken to enhance activist connections in the post-Yugoslav space were also manifested in the 2006 Southeastern European Pride held in Zagreb. For those coming from more hostile and homophobic areas, participation in a public LGBTIQ event in some other country has been a way to express their identities without creating too much discomfort and fear of being outed. Organized by the members of the SEEQ Network and named "The Internationale Pride," that event aimed to encourage the organization of Prides in other states. Since then, besides Croatia and Slovenia, Pride marches have also taken place in Serbia (in 2010 and again from 2014) and Montenegro (from 2013). The most recent example of regional cooperation and exchange is Trans Network Balkan, formed in 2014 as a platform for promoting trans rights and giving support to local trans groups and individuals "in the Balkan region."

Besides pointing to those cases of regional mobility and networking of queer individuals and groups in the post-Yugoslav region, the research I have conducted ten years ago also documented four narratives embodying internal queer migration experiences in Croatia. Those are the tales of moving from home environments of small towns and the countryside to the capital, to Zagreb, to "a place, which gives you a feeling of freedom, security and anonymity." Although the collected testimonies differ in terms of personal motives and reasons to migrate (violence, education and work prospects, intimate partnership), all of them are underlined by the impossibility of fully living and expressing their identities back home. Another aspect that marks those queer migration experiences, as well as all other migrant realities, concerns the issue of ensuring a livelihood and its complex links to migration processes. In this case, for all interviewees, involvement in social networks within the capital's LGBTIQ community was perceived as

instrumental in securing accommodation and work in their new environment. However, for some of them, in their plans and visions of transnational migration, Zagreb was also viewed as "a temporary sanctuary" on their way to London, Berlin or San Francisco. Taken together, these experiences illustrate the normative "gay migration narrative"/"urban coming-out story," which integrates journeys, regarding both geography and identity: leaving "a suffocating, closed atmosphere" and coming(-out) to a city, to "a new home, with a new family," to "be what one really is."

One of these research tracks followed developments in the life of Daniel, a young queer scholar and activist from Zadar, from 2007–2010. More precisely, it focused on his relationship with Paul from Klagenfurt, and on the border regimes and settlement policies affecting their relationship. It is a relationship between two gay men who belong to different nations, and, at that time, it was a relationship between an EU citizen and a "third country national." They met in 2007 in Croatia, where Paul came as an Erasmus exchange program student. For Daniel it was the first time he lived an openly gay life, and that motivated him to continue the relationship. After Paul finished his semester and returned home, Daniel started to travel frequently to visit his partner in Austria.

In order to keep the relationship going, Daniel and Paul encountered multiple, exclusive legal barriers regulating movement, residence, and access to the labor market within Schengen's perimeter. On one of his journeys to Austria via Slovenia, in the summer of 2008, Daniel was informed by the Slovenian border police that he was close to the limit of ninety days, the maximum allowed to non-EU citizens to reside within Schengen's limits every six months. Nevertheless, Daniel came up with an elusive strategy for overcoming that regulation, made possible due to the pre-Schengen bilateral agreements between Croatia and bordering

EU countries Slovenia, Italy, and Hungary, which allows Croatian citizens to enter those states with only their personal identity card. [5] However, travelling to another EU state via Slovenia, Italy or Hungary, still required a passport, and if a person was caught in some other EU country without a valid passport it would be considered "illegal entry." On his travel from Zadar to Klagenfurt via Zagreb, Ljubljana, and Villach, Daniel's method was the following:

I combine it this way: when I notice that the three month limit is approaching – usually the border police warns me – then I don't touch my passport for the next three months, and instead enter Slovenia with my ID card and lie that I am going to Ljubljana for some reason, whatever I come up with. And then after three months, I use my passport again and I rotate them like that. I've done that at least five times so far. Here I have to point out that as a Croatian citizen I have the privilege to cheat that way.

Besides having Croatian citizenship, Daniel is also very conscious of his privilege of having fair skin:

Klagenfurt is a fascist town and I'm positive that if I were Black, I would have already been ID'ed and disclosed a couple of times, but I'm white and that's saved me. So I was never ID'ed by the police. And how many weren't that lucky? I realize that there's a strong correlation between state borders and borders between sexual identities, as in the end there's the same operating logic of exclusion and the fear of the Other serving as markers of superiority – white, heterosexual, class.

Faced with obstacles in securing material conditions for their relationship in Austria (residence and work permits for Daniel), they both successfully applied to study programs in Slovenia in 2009. That ensured their living together, and Daniel, based on his

student status, obtained a Slovenian residence permit valid for one year – and equally important – had the possibility to work through the student service.

When the Law on registered same-sex couples came into force in Austria in January 2010, they began to consider that option, although it goes against their personal and political beliefs that "marriage (or legal union) is a natural and the only 'act and symbol of love' among today's multiple intimate relationships, which ensures some important rights." It became an option because of Daniel's "immigrant" status and their shared precarious student/ worker class conditions, both being shaped and framed by "the issues of borders and migration in global capitalistic economy and its regulation of labor, capital, and people." However, in the process of registering their partnership, Daniel and Paul have encountered the same difficulties as bi-national heterosexual couples. The procedure requires, among many other things, for a "third country national" to submit a request from their country of origin, and for the Austrian partner to prove a minimum monthly income of 1,100 euro and a rental contract/apartment ownership. In addition, a residence permit does not guarantee a work permit, for which a separate application is needed, which also points to how hard it can be to both accomplish migration goals and to safeguard a livelihood.

At the end of 2010, they were still uncertain if and how they would have been able to meet those requirements. Still, as I continued my communication with Daniel after the project ended, it turned out that in November 2011 they got married in Austria, but gained their rights through the EU Family Reunification Directive, made possible because they had the same address during their studies in Ljubljana, and because Paul, as an EU citizen, exercized his mobility rights while studying and living with his partner in

another EU country. Thereby they bypassed the requirements of Austrian legal procedure, and, after registering, Daniel was granted a 5-year visa with both residence and work permission. The whole process was facilitated by consultations and information provided to Daniel and Paul by *Ehe ohne Grenzen*.[6]

Apart from the pull factors of more tolerant countries that offer legal protection and recognition for LGBTIQ individuals, the causes behind the migration processes of many queer individuals from the post-Yugoslav region are strongly influenced by push factors: the high-level of homophobia, discrimination, and violence experienced in their domicile states. That is especially relevant in the cases of activists, who were often the first media-exposed LGBTIQ persons, and those who organized the first public LGBTIQ events. In almost all instances, except for the first Ljubljana Pride in 2001, those pioneering efforts were the targets of brutal and violent attacks as physical manifestations of widespread social homophobia and transphobia in the region: Belgrade Pride in 2001 and again in 2010; Zagreb Pride in 2002; the Queer Sarajevo Festival in 2008; Split Pride in 2011; Budva Pride, and Podgorica Pride in 2013.

The most recent example of activist emigration prompted by violence and threats, continuous negative media exposure, and a lack of state protection concerns Boban Stojanović, a long-time activist and co-organizer of Belgrade Pride. In January 2017, Stojanović reported on Facebook that he and his partner were granted asylum in Canada, based on 23 unresolved cases of violence in Serbia. Six years earlier, in 2011, Majda Puača, another prominent queer activist from Serbia, was granted asylum in the USA on the basis of her sexual orientation and political opinion, and because her health and life were endangered in Serbia. As a public relations person for the Belgrade Prides of 2009 (forbidden

by the state for “security reasons”) and 2010 (with violent riots all over the city), Puača was extremely exposed in the media, which resulted in numerous incidents of public harassment, and rape and death threats: “there are fascists who threaten and follow you at every step … they called me ‘the head dyke’ in the street … my address and phone number were publicized in their forums … at the market, in the store, at the gym, I was always their target.”

Those feelings of fear and everyday insecurity echo in the deliberations of two other queer activists who (e)migrated from the post-Yugoslav region to the USA. Svetlana Đurković, one of the organizers of the 2008 Queer Sarajevo Festival,[7] which was violently interrupted at its opening with death threats sent to the organizers, recalls “a life without using public transportation, a life with minimal mobility… we had a blanket on the window at the new office.“ Jay Poštić, a long-time Zagreb Pride activist, remembers that “years after those Prides, I would feel shaken every time someone yelled in the streets. I would not take public transportation. It was preventative, but also a real fear. People were beaten at that time, there were death threats over the phone to people around me.“ Contacting the police in many cases did not help, as Puača describes how she reported threats received on Facebook from clearly identifiable persons, and the police simply suggested turning off a specific Facebook account option; or as Đurković comments: “When you live in the state where everything is a conspiracy, then you do not even completely trust the police.”

Apart from attacks and harassment, and a lack of state protection, burnout was also an important factor in those queer activist emigrations. In their narratives they describe feelings of senselessness, depression, nausea, exhaustion, loss, guilt, and betrayal that lead to a lack of productivity and creativity, insomnia, health problems, nervous breakdowns, and even post-traumatic

stress disorder. While coping with burnout, they learned that there is a strong need for “periods of rest and recharging,“ the need “to balance activist engagement and private/personal life,“ the need “to learn to live my own life and to do things that I like, to hike, to make fruit jams.“ To recover and to start to prioritize one’s own life over activism, it was necessary to move to some other place, to a place “where no one knows you,” to a place “where no one leers at you when you and your girlfriend kiss and hold hands, where no one stares at you in public transportation and wonders if you are male or female,“ as voiced by Mima Simić, a longstanding queer activist commenting on her own decision to leave, realizing that she is “more beneficial to herself by living in Berlin than to Croatian activism by living in Zagreb.”

For Puača, Đurković and Poštić, integration processes in the USA have included solidarity and help from local queer communities for securing accommodation and work, the same networks of support identified in the narratives of internal queer migrants in Croatia. Securing a livelihood, an inseparable but often difficult part of every migrant's journey, is facilitated by belonging to the community of marginalized identities, the one that also lies in the background of decisions to migrate, whether because of its non-existence in the place of origin (small towns and rural environments), or because of fighting for its right (in the case of LGBTIQ activists).

In the process of applying for asylum, Puača was represented by Immigration Equality,[8] an organization providing free legal services and policy advocacy on behalf of LGBTIQ *immigrants*, and the organization where she has finally found regular employment after three and a half years of living in New York with temporary, low-paying jobs, and no health insurance. Puača's first-hand experiences at the margins of the career-orientated, credit rating-

based capitalist system, evoked consideration of some aspects of the social and political heritage of the Yugoslav system:

It has to be like that if you want to survive here. There is no retirement fund, no free health insurance, no free education – things we are used to. As different as our system was, and as impractical as it sometimes was, there was something to it […] The way we were brought up in that socialism made us instructed towards each other. You will help, and there will be someone there when you need it. Here, individuality is imposed by capitalism from the very beginning.

The stories of displacement of queer individuals from the post-Yugoslav region presented in this text sketch out aspects of migratory movements and experiences that are often overlooked and undocumented in the mainstream discourse on migration. In addition, those experiences of queer mobility carry the potential for retrospectively disrupting the heteronormativity of the old *Gastarbeiter* migration narrative, not least considering that homosexuality was criminalized in Yugoslavia from 1959–1977. The economic realities of "earning-for-a-living" play a strong role in the collected queer migrants' testimonies sketched out here: the issues of the employment opportunities of Zagreb's LGBTIQ civil society and profit sectors for young queer internal migrants in Croatia; Daniel's oscillating statuses of a postgraduate student, a "third-country faggot," and an unemployed immigrant worker; as well as a Serbian radical queer activist's close encounters with the requirements of the advanced capitalist economic system that come along with the granted permission to live in the USA. Those all point to the commonality of a material basis to any kind of resettlement, as well as to the problems and challenges of migration and integration processes in the relation to the existing forms of labor organization and economic inequalities.

[1] This text uses some modified parts from two published articles: Hodžić, A. (2010). "Waitressing Is an Awful Job When You're Gay in a Straight Bar: Queer Migration in Croatia." In Bakondy, V. et al. (eds.) Good Luck! Migration Today: Vienna, Belgrade, Zagreb, Istanbul: pp. 422–429. Vienna: Initiative Minderheiten; Hodžić, A. (2010). "Queer Migration in & out of Croatia: Waitressing Is an Awful Job When You're Gay in a Straight Bar." Anthropology of East Europe Review 28(2): 271–278.

[2] Already in 1984, Magnus organized the first edition of the Ljubljana Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, which claims to be the oldest gay and lesbian film festival in Europe.

[3] Queer Belgrade Festivals were organized in the period from 2004–2008 by Queer Beograd Collective, a radical queer group that was employing various activist forms and approaches to politically engage in the topic of intersecting oppressions of patriarchy, sexism, homophobia, nationalism, racism, capitalism, and militarism.

[4] Queeroslavia (Queer + Yugoslavia) is a creative hint to a "post-Yugoslav longing for queer transnational citizenship."

[5] In 2007, it was agreed that the provision would continue to be applied as the exception from Schengen rules. An interim solution was found that to enter these three neighboring states with a valid Croatian ID, it must be accompanied by an additional single-use entry and exit card stamped at the border.

[6] A civil society organization working towards equal rights for bi-national couples in Austria, *Ehe ohne Grenzen* (marriage without borders) was founded in 2006, in response to the Aliens Law Package, which sets a very restrictive immigrant residency and work permit system that massively affects bi-national couples in Austria.

[7] The Queer Sarajevo Festival was organized by the Association Q (active from 2004–2010), the first civil society organization in Bosnia and Hercegovina focused on the promotion and protection of the rights of LGBTIQ people.

[8] Since 1994, Immigration Equality has been providing advice and legal services to LGBTIQ and HIV-positive immigrants seeking asylum in the USA.