

Border (Power) Politics Reborn in the Refugee Crisis: Contested Lines of Demarcation and the Re-emergence of Identity Conflicts: The Case of Serbia and Croatia

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Abstract The refugee crisis in 2015 and 2016 has brought the region of the Western Balkans back into the international news headlines. For months the so-called ‘Western Balkans-Route’ was a major arterial road for refugees with the ultimate goal of reaching Germany and other Western European countries. This chapter starts by establishing a conceptual model, based on Rogers Brubaker’s relational argument, to explain the continued importance of nationalism and consequently of border (power) politics in the region. By illustrating the conflict between Croatia and Serbia over refugees in fall 2015, the chapter reveals the structure of newly emerging political battles and identity discourses surrounding the concept of borders and demarcations in the Balkans. The chapter argues that developments on and around the ‘Western Balkans-Route’ contributed to the re-emergence of concepts of borders and demarcations in the political realm. The refugee crisis re-opened and re-fueled old identity conflict lines thus contributing to an increase in nationalist rhetoric and behavior. More substantially, the refugee crisis and subsequent events have contributed to the reaffirmation of borders, and thus strengthening of exclusive nation-state concepts in the Balkans.

Keywords Border politics • Refugees • Nationalism • Western Balkans • Serbia • Croatia

1 Introduction

The refugee crisis of 2015 and 2016 has brought the region of the Western Balkans back into the international news headlines. For months the so-called ‘Western Balkans-Route’ was a major arterial road for refugees from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan with the ultimate goal of reaching Germany and other Western European

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countries. The already fragile and rather unstable Western Balkans states have struggled to cope with the mass influx of refugees, which has resulted both in the appearance of new demarcation and identity conflict lines as well as the emergence of new nationalisms throughout the region. The closure of the Croatian and Serbian border in fall 2015, during the peak of the refugee crisis, reinforced old animosities and enhanced conflicting rhetoric. From the beginning of the crisis Southeastern Europe has witnessed the erection of new fences on the border between Slovenia and Croatia, between Macedonia and Greece, etc. This has sparked debates about the consequences of new border regimes, both on regional stability and cooperation, as well as on broader issues such as EU-integration, national identities and the further development of democracy in the region.

Against the background of the recent refugee crisis, in this chapter I argue that since fall 2015, developments in the Western Balkans have contributed to the re-emergence of concepts of borders and demarcations in the political realm. I use consciously the terms 're-emergence' as the events and debates relate directly to the discourses and narratives of the early 1990s. Or to put it more precisely, the 1990s are the birth-place of border (power) politics in the Balkans, while recent events can be described as a prolongation and a re-birth under new circumstances. In any case, following a period of enhanced and intensified regional cooperation and normalization since 2000 (at least between Croatia and Serbia, but also more broadly), the recent refugee crisis has re-opened and re-fueled old identity conflict lines thus contributing to an increase in nationalist rhetoric and behavior. More substantially, the refugee crisis and subsequent events have contributed to the reaffirmation of borders and thus the strengthening of exclusive nation-state concepts in the Balkans. Here I argue that the process of political instrumentalization of (ethnic/national) differences and borders (real and discursive ones) between the states in the Balkans based on nationalism and old identity conflict lines from the 1990s can be described as a border (power) politics. I describe this kind of border politics as power politics, alluding to the ultimate goal that is pursued by political (nationalist) elites in the region, which is basically equal to remaining in power. Based on theoretical thoughts on nationalism, the following chapter aims at (a) establishing a conceptual model to explain the continued importance of nationalism, and consequently of border (power) politics in the region based on Rogers Brubaker's relational argument, (b) sketching out the newly emerged border (power) politics in the regional context of Southeastern Europe based on the conflict over refugees between Croatia and Serbia in fall 2015, and (c) uncovering the structure of newly emerging political battles and identity discourses surrounding the concept of borders and demarcations between countries in the Western Balkans.

This chapter draws on an extensive analysis both of the general literature on nationalism as well as the regional literature on the effects and consequences of nationalism in the Western Balkans. The case study on Serbia and Croatia during the course of the refugee crisis is based on an analysis of statements of policy-makers, as well as content analysis of media reporting in major regional news outlets.

2 Background: Roots and Persistence of Ethno-nationalism and Border (Power) Politics in the Balkans

Politics in the last years of the Former Yugoslavia were shaped by nationalism and nation-state building processes, based on strict borders between nations and newly established exclusive identity boundaries. The annual celebrations on the Field of Blackbirds (Kosovosko polje) on 28 June marked the beginning of the end of Former Yugoslavia. The celebrations eventually became a symbol of new demarcation lines forming within the broader Yugoslav society. Nearly one million Serbs gathered to celebrate the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo Polje in 1989.¹ Slobodan Milošević, who took power in Serbia in 1987, gave the key address during the celebrations and launched the final phase of his nationalist-populist campaign against the alleged discrimination of Serbia within the Yugoslav state. By reminding the crowd of possible violent conflicts in the near future and deploying all his rhetorical power to draw thick lines of distinction between Serbs and ‘unfriendly’ nations within the Yugoslav federation Milošević marked the beginning of border (power) politics based on the resource of nationalism (Magaš 1992; Jović 2003; Allcock 2000).

From this point onwards, the crisis of the Yugoslav state became acute and its dissolution unfolded. Milošević’s Serbian nationalism triggered new forms of nationalist political formations in other Yugoslav republics. Franjo Tuđman emerged as Milošević’s counterpart in Croatia. Tuđman promoted an ethnically homogenous Croatian nation-state and emphasized the differences between Croatia and the other republics. At the beginning of the 1990s, the already deep gap between the Western republics of Slovenia and Croatia on the one side, and an alliance formed around Serbia on the other, was rapidly widening. It culminated in the demolition of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia in January 1990 and would subsequently lead to violent ethnic conflicts and wars. Socialist Yugoslavia went up in flames (Ramet 1992; Woodward 1995; Jović 2003). The ‘rebirth’ of nations, and consequently new national borders in Southern Europe, led to a nationalistic frenzy with numerous victims and erection of new national borders in the Balkans marked not only by new states, but also new strong and exclusive ethnic and national identities (Mappes-Niediek 2005). The fight for the demarcation from the ethnic ‘other’, fought by all means, became the main feature of politics in the region in the 1990s, only to be perpetuated in the subsequent period of so-called ‘transition to democracy’. The interpretation of the recent past, based on exclusive narratives about the events of the 1900s (Ingrao and Thomas 2009), became a power resource fully in place until today, able to nurture new potential conflicts and re-affirm strict border and demarcation lines between ethnic groups, nations and newly established states in the Balkans. Deep and still persistent demarcation lines and cleavages between the Croatian and Serbian narrative, the Bosniak, Croatian

¹The Battle of Kosovo Polje took place on 28th June 1389, when a Christian army faced the invading Ottomans. The Battle figures prominently in the Serbian national mythology.

and Serbian narrative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or the narrative between Kosovo Albanians and Serbs (and further to the South between Greek and Macedonians), function until today as a repository for any kind of border (power) politics that emerge. This is precisely the background against which I try to frame and explore the newest emergence of border (power) politics in the course of the refugee crisis in 2015 and 2016.

3 Conceptualizing Nationalism and Border (Power) Politics in South Eastern Europe: Relational Framing and Creation of ‘Groupness’ Around Borders

Already the ancient term ‘ethnic’ marked boundaries between groups, based on their self-attributed ‘ethnic’ distinctiveness and exclusivity (Volkan 1999). Ethnic boundaries are, therefore, usually ‘the result of a reflexive selection process; they occur only in opposition to other, similarly structured groups’ (Orywal and Hackstein 1993: 600). Such a process ultimately results in bringing borders and demarcation lines (both in terms of discourse as well as territorial/material borders) to the forefront. Opposition to the other, and selection according to the distinction between ‘we’ and ‘you’, is a permanent process with conjunctures and fluctuations, and where the opposite is not necessarily always present. Quite often the ‘imagined other’ (Anderson 1988), even within one ethnic group or nation, is sufficient to draw boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

The construction of this ‘uniqueness and exclusivity’ is made possible through massive and deliberate manipulation and mythologizing of history as well as through processes of exclusion (of the real or imagined other). At the core of this narrative stands an identifiable ethnic group living within borders of ‘our nation-state’ which is considered to be better, stronger, more resistant and superior, exclusive ‘we’ group different than the ‘other’ groups, which are generally perceived and constructed as being a threat. This is what is described as the construction of ‘otherness’ (see Ćurak 2004; and Džihic et al. 2006). It is important to note that different ethnicities or national belongings *a priori* do not provide a reason and an explanation for conflicts. Their conflictive potential develops only, and where, one’s own uniqueness and exclusivity is perceived as being endangered, and where—speaking in terms of political power games—the interests of power groups and networks (including political parties, oligarchs, etc.) are endangered (Barth 1969). Thus, ethnicity is a tool that can be interpreted and instrumentalized differently in different political circumstances.

Ethnicity is a relationship between two or several groups, not a property of a group; it exists between and not within groups. . . . Ethnicity is the enduring and systematic communication of cultural differences between groups considering themselves to be distinct. It appears whenever cultural differences are made relevant in social interaction, and it should thus be studied at the level of social life, not at the level of symbolic culture. Ethnicity is thus relational, and also situational; the ethnic character of a social encounter is contingent on the situation. It is not, in other words, absolute. (Eriksen 2002: 58)

An important insight into the relational character of ethnic groups and nations that is relevant for my conceptualization of border (power) politics is provided by Rogers Brubaker's theoretical and analytical frameworks. Brubaker's point of departure is a critical re-consideration of the concept of the 'group', which is a concept that is usually taken-for-granted in the context of theories of nationalism and often not further scrutinized. Brubaker describes the tendency to take groups for granted as 'groupism' (see Brubaker 2002). He postulated the need to stop uncritically adopting categories of ethno-political and nationalist practice as categories of social analysis.

By invoking groups (actors) evoke them, summon them, call them into being. Their categories are for doing—designed to stir, summon, justify, mobilize, kindle, and energize. By reifying groups, by treating them as substantial things-in-the-world, ethno-political entrepreneurs may, as Bourdieu notes, 'contribute to producing what they apparently describe or designate' (Brubaker 2002: 7)

Taking Brubaker's thinking and re-conceptualisation of groups and nations a step further I suggest that borders, and consequently border (power) politics, can be thought of and conceptualized along the lines of Brubaker's thinking about 'groupness'. Usually, territorial borders are, once negotiated and agreed upon, taken for granted, and there is good reason for them lying at the heart of international law and their being connected with the conceptualization of the modern state and its sovereignty. However, in cases like in Former Yugoslavia, where we have had several layers of conflicts over borders and demarcation lines in the past, borders taken as 'things-in-the-world' (Brubaker 2002) become categories of doing. In this process the borders are capable of 'stirring, summoning, justifying, mobilizing, kindling and energizing' differences, and thus able to reinforce the power of nationalism, and in the very end, to fortify power positions. It is precisely the process of (a) mobilizing, energizing and utilizing differences (more precisely ethnic differences in the Former Yugoslavian context) for power purposes (gaining and retaining power), and (b) creating borders as lines of distinction between 'our' group and the 'other' that I define as 'border (power) politics'.

Returning to the events in Former Yugoslavia at the beginning of the 1990s Brubaker's analytical model can provide an explanation for the emergence of nationalism and border (power) politics in the 1990s. Based on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of fields, and relations between fields, Brubaker developed a new analytical framework that brought in an analysis of the dynamics of nationalism (Brubaker 2006). According to Brubaker's argument, nationalism is generated within political fields, which he describes as a 'triadic relational nexus' or 'triangular relationships' (Brubaker 2006). Brubaker's nexus involves a 'dynamic interdependence' among the following three 'fields': a newly emergent 'nationalizing state', an ethnocultural or 'national minority' residing within it, and an external 'national homeland' state of the expatriate 'national minority'. In applying his framework to the '*locus classicus*' of national self-determination in post-Cold War Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, Brubaker predicted a downward spiral of conflict, and potentially the emergence of explosive violence resulting from

interactions among the three fields of his triad (Ibid.). This downward spiral is precisely the one that occurred in the 1990s in the territory of Former Yugoslavia. Brubaker's idea is that specific interests and demands, which are formulated and pursued within individual fields, create a framework of diverging relations (based on distinct national and exclusive narratives of the past and nationalist instrumentalisation of these narratives) in which the population can be mobilized, and which bestow upon actual conflicts between ethno-national groups the appearance of 'naturalness' and 'eternity'. Once the conflicts appear 'natural' and 'eternal', the dynamics between the three fields can be orchestrated by political forces, thus becoming a power tool par excellence. Our case study, with the seemingly 'natural' and 'eternal' conflict line between Serbs and Croats, fits perfectly into the analytical model provided by Brubaker.

Stephen Del Rosso highlights a certain lack of explanatory power in Brubaker's thesis. Del Rosso proposed an essential fourth field: external influences, and refers to the implications of these on the dynamics between the three fields defined by Brubaker. Del Rosso speaks about globalization, and more precisely in the context of Eastern and Southeastern Europe, of the processes of 'Europeanization', involving political/economic, normative, and technological/cultural elements (Del Rosso 2004). Indeed, in the context of the Post-Yugoslav region the international community, and in particular the EU, need to be included as important external agents into analysis.

Selectively appropriating key elements of Brubaker's model and adding this external variable provided by Del Rosso helps us to transfer Brubaker's concept into the realm of border (power) politics of today, in the context of the refugee crisis in the Western Balkans. Borders in the context of the former Yugoslavia are here understood as being 'subject to constant reinterpretation, reincarnation and redrawing' (Iveković 2008).

My general argument would be the following: The triadic nexus of the 'nationalizing state', an ethnocultural or 'national minority' residing within it, and an external 'national homeland', sparked the ethno-nationalist forces in the period of the dissolution of Former Yugoslavia, creating a fertile ground for the persistent instrumentalisation of this triadic nexus since the 1990s until today. As a result, new border regimes emerged on the territory of Former Yugoslavia, materialized as the borders of new national states (leaving huge minorities outside) and as mutually exclusive narratives. Since 2000, the EU-integration process became a dominant external variable (Džihic and Wieser 2011; BIEPAG 2015) and emerged as a fourth field, which has influenced the triadic nexus. Although the EU has been able to exercise power politics by its own, it has, so far not been able to substantially alter the dynamics of ethno-nationalism. Finally, I argue that in times of fundamental turbulence within the EU and of weakened power politics in the framework of Europeanization, the actors in the region tend to retreat to the original dynamics of nationalism and border (power) politics from the 1990s.

4 The Refugee Crisis and Conflict Between Croatia and Serbia²

The latest border-crisis in the Balkans was triggered by a fence. In July 2015, Hungary began building a fence along its 110-mile border with Serbia. When Hungary closed its doors to the tens of thousands of refugees heading north partly violent clashes including water cannons and tear gas occurred, leading to high tensions in both countries. There were chaotic scenes near the border crossing at Horgos, with burning fires, police vehicles and ambulances arriving on the Serbian side of the border across from massed ranks of riot police on the Hungarian side (Radio Free Europe 2016). The Prime Minister of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, reiterated that the current Hungarian policy towards refugees is harmful and dangerous. In the following days he stepped up the rhetoric with statements where he drew comparison to the World War II (Ibid.).

Nevertheless, Hungary's fence-building caused a domino effect that played out across the Balkan region (Ernst 2015). As the war of words intensified, masses of weary refugees continued their way up the 'Western Balkans route', this time choosing the way from Macedonia to Serbia and further north to Croatia, Slovenia and finally into Austria and Germany. As Serbia started diverting refugees to Croatia the Serbian-Croatian relationship started to deteriorate rapidly.

Zoran Milanović, the prime minister of Croatia, demanded that Serbia send some of the refugees to Hungary or Romania and pledged that he would not allow Serbia to 'make fools of us'. The refugee dispute between Serbia and Croatia escalated leading to a trade war. Belgrade closed the main border crossing Bajakovo-Batrovci to all trucks with Croatian plates and to all those transporting goods produced in Croatia. In retaliation, Croatia closed the crossing to cars with Serbian plates. At that time, Bajakovo-Batrovci was the last of eight crossing points that had remained open to both trucks and cars after the dispute of the previous week. Croatia then went on to block trucks coming from Serbia at Bajakovo-Batrovci, in a further attempt to pressure Belgrade to redirect the migrant flow towards Hungary and Romania (Balkan Insight 2015).

Both Serbia and Croatia ramped up the rather nationalist rhetoric. They started trading blame and accusations of lying, while at the same time openly and aggressively disparaging each other's actions as 'pathetic' or a 'disgrace'. What was striking is the fact that the highest officials were engaged in reviving the old inflammatory rhetoric, reminiscent of that of the 1990s. The infamous exchange between Serbian Prime Minister Vučić and Croatian Prime Minister Zoran Milanović is one of the most illustrative examples. The debate was sparked by Serbian Social Affairs Minister Aleksandar Vulin who, following the closure of all but one border crossing between Croatia and Serbia by Croatia authorities, said 'I

²If not differently stated the events and developments here are based on the continuous following of media reporting around the refugee crisis provided by Radio Free Europa, T-Portal, B92.net and Al Jazeera Balkans.

am sorry to see that Croatian humanity and solidarity lasted just two days,' immediately warning the neighbors that Serbia intended to take the issue to the international courts. From its new strong position in the region as a member state of the EU, the Croatian Prime Minister Milanović responded sharply, and compared Serbia state power with a fly, which symbolizes something small and unimportant. He added that '(An) eagle does not hunt flies. Croatia is an eagle' (B92.net 2015a, September 18). The Foreign Minister of Serbia, Ivica Dačić, answered with a quote from a very famous Former Yugoslav movie 'The spy from the Balkans' (Balkanski špijun), 'The eagle was downed'. And finally, Prime Minister Vučić said that he wouldn't take the bait sending a message to Zagreb that Serbia will do everything it can to protect its interests (Ibid.).

The past also figured dominantly in the conflict, which was seen in a further statement issued in September 2015. For example, the protest letter by the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent to the Croatian Embassy in Belgrade called for a travel ban for the Serbian passport holders, a measure that was not appropriate for the 'civilized world'. The Statement of the Ministry continued: '[The] discriminatory character of such measures can be compared only with the measures undertaken in the past, at the time of the fascist Independent Croatian State' (B92.net 2015b, September 24). While Serbia cried Nazism and recalled Storm (the operation of the Croatian forces against territory in Croatia ruled in 1999 by the Serbs), the Croatian side mentioned Vukovar,³ which is paradoxically a city near where the refugees were crossing the border between the two countries.

This fierce exchange happened against the background of an already shaky relationship between Serbia and Croatia, full of historical resentments (Gagnon 2004). The major dispute between these two former adversaries is fueled by different interpretations of the war. While Croatian narratives see Croats as a victor in a rightful war to protect their sovereignty, Serbian narratives depict Serbs as victims of ethnic cleansing and a 'fascist' Croatia (Jović 2012). Nationalist forces on both sides have been keeping these mutually exclusive narratives high on the agenda and use every opportunity to define the other side as the absolute 'Other'. This border between the two national narratives was re-installed and strengthened as a real border during the events of 2015 related to the refugee crisis.

The current hostility between Croatia and Serbia has been shaped by domestic political considerations and power dynamics both in Zagreb and Belgrade. In Croatia, elections were due to be held in February 2016. The Croatian economy had been in recession for 6 years and only recently begun to show small signs of growth. This was a welcome moment for Croatian political representatives to revive old nationalist rhetoric as a distraction from domestic problems. On the other side, the Serbian Prime Minister Vučić found himself facing rising pressure from right-wing parties, and partly from some parts of his own Serbia Progressive Party (SNS),

³Vukovar was the major site of fighting between Croatian armed forces and Yugoslav Peoples' Army (JNA) and Serb paramilitaries in the second half of 1991. During the siege of the city and the final surrender to the JNA major war crimes were committed.

to react to what was widely perceived as aggressive behavior and humiliation by Croatia. In the following months Serbia and Croatia continued with harsh rhetoric, which even included a debate about buying new offensive weapons (Nikolić 2016). This debate can be seen as a continuation of the conflict sparked by the refugee crisis and events of fall 2015. During this armament debate, media outlets in both countries stepped up their sensationalist coverage, with politicians on both sides sending controversial messages to each other. For example, Prime Minister Vučić stated that ‘Serbia will never attack anyone, but must be able to protect its territory and citizens at any moment. We are keeping quiet, doing nothing faced with the threats of those others who are not giving up on acquiring very powerful offensive weapons’ (Nikolić 2016). Croatian politicians responded with harsh accusations against Vučić and Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić, blaming them for being senior officials of the Serbian government during the 1990s which initiated conflicts in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo (Ibid.).

To sum it up, the above described events once again emphasised how an externally induced crisis (the refugee crisis) can immediately reinforce old conflict lines and fuel animosities. The political reasoning in Croatia and Serbia, and the fact that both sides have been using the refugee crisis to fortify their power positions, serves internally as a paradigmatic case of border (power) politics. For both the Croatian government, which at that time was already entering an intensive election campaign, as well as for the Serbian government, which shortly after the events announced the date for new elections, the refugee crisis and the newly sparked conflict lines served the purpose of strengthening the position and the image of ‘strong leaders’ (Milanović and Vučić).

Vessela Tcherneva and Fredrik Wesslau argued: ‘This humanitarian crisis is leading to rapidly deteriorating relations between the countries in the region, with politicians eagerly channelling long-veiled animosities and gaining electoral wins through rough exchanges with neighbours’ (Tcherneva and Wesslau 2015). The speed at which Serbia and Croatia resorted to vicious mutual insults was rapid and can be explained by the already available framework for the emergence of nationalism from the 1990s, within Brubaker’s triadic nexus, and by the instrumentalisation of nationalism and border (power) politics since the 1990s.

Moving from the events of 2015 to more recent developments, we’ve witnessed a decrease in the relevance of the Western Balkans route during the course of 2016. At the beginning of 2016, the debate on dealing with the refugee crisis on the European level quickly moved towards the introduction of more rigid measures on the borders by Western European states like Austria and the closure of the Western Balkans Route to refugees. This development came after February 2016 when Austria decided to introduce a new general limit for refugees arriving in 2016 (Selo Šabić and Borić 2016), and a daily limit of refugees allowed to enter and to be registered in the country. This triggered EU fears of a domino effect along the so-called Balkan ‘migrant’ route, a fear that was only fueled by the events following the so-called Western Balkans conference organized by Austria on February 24, that was harshly criticized by Greece, Italy, Germany and the EU Commission. Western Balkan states decided to follow Austria’s example and either drastically limit the number of refugees allowed to cross their borders on a daily basis or close their

borders to them altogether. After March 2016, the border between Macedonia and Greece, and particularly the refugee camp in Idomeni, became the new and rather violent hot spot, adding a new dimension to the refugee crisis.

As the focus of the refugee crisis in the first few months of 2016 shifted away from the Western Balkans towards Greece, Turkey and the Mediterranean Sea, the status of the relationship between Croatia and Serbia remains open. Formally, and in terms of border and migration management, the relations between Western Balkan countries have improved, particularly as they have begun to share information, open communication lines and better coordinate plans and policies to deal with refugees and migrants. However, the tensions and rather nationalist rhetorics that emerged in the fall of 2015 continued and even escalated against the background of the final verdict against (and acquittal of) Vojislav Šešelj at The Hague Tribunal at the end of March 2016. Croatian authorities and public opinion reacted angrily. The newly appointed Croatian Prime Minister, Tihomir Orešković, described the verdict as a setback for justice. ‘This verdict is an embarrassment for the Hague Tribunal and represents a defeat for the Hague prosecution... This is a man who has never shown remorse for the things he has done, not even now. He’s the man who is burning the flags of Croatia and the EU’ (Balkan Insight 2016). Just a few days following the Šešelj verdict, Croatia took formal action against Serbia demanding better treatment of Croats in Serbia and more action on war crimes, forcing the European Council to postpone negotiations with Belgrade on two chapters of EU legislation. The reaction of Serbian officials and the public came immediately. Prime Minister Vučić, finding himself in the middle of the election campaign, was ‘stunned’ by Croatia’s decision and sent a strong message to Zagreb that ‘Croatia did not have a single good reason for that decision. Serbia . . . will not allow anyone in Europe and the world, including Croatia, to blackmail, humiliate and demean it in any way’ (Euractiv). This latest episode in the newly re-emerged conflict between Croatia and Serbia in the aftermath of the refugee crisis is again proof of the re-emergence of nationalist border (power) politics in the region.

5 Conclusion: The Refugee Crisis as a Crystallization Point for a New Kind of Nationalist Border (Power) Politics in the Western Balkans

The recent and ongoing developments in the refugee crisis provide a picture of insecurity in terms of further development of border (power) politics in the Balkans. As the Croatian-Serbian dispute since the fall 2015 shows, the nationalist border (power) politics remains a dominant feature of the Balkans entailing potential for further escalation of the situation and continued mobilization in their societies around nationalism. This chapter departed from theoretical considerations on nationalism against the background of the ethno-nationalism and mutually exclusive narratives from the 1990s. It went on to establish a conceptual model for the explanation of the continued importance of nationalism, and consequently of border

(power) politics in the region, based on Rogers Brubaker's relational argumentation. By illustrating the conflict over refugees between Croatia and Serbia in fall 2015, the paper uncovered the structure of newly emerging political battles and identity discourses surrounding the concept of borders and demarcations in the Balkans.

We can conclude that the recent refugee crisis re-opened and re-fueled old identity conflict lines, thus contributing to an increase in nationalist rhetoric and behavior. More substantially, the refugee crisis has contributed once again to the reaffirmation of borders, and thus the strengthening of nation-state concepts in the Balkans, described as a border (power) politics based on ethnic differences and nationalism. The final argument presented was that in times of fundamental turbulence within the EU, and of weakened power politics in the framework of Europeanization, actors in the region retreated to the original dynamics of nationalism and border (power) politics from the 1990s. Obviously, looking at the region today and applying Rogers Brubaker's triadic nexus, the original 'triadic nexus' between a 'nationalizing state', an ethnocultural or 'national minority' and an external 'national homeland' has been altered in the meantime, resulting in more or less stable nation states (Croatia and Serbia) and 'national minorities' (of Serbs in Croatia, and Croats in Serbia) in a less prominent position than in the 1990s. Even though the 'triadic nexus' has changed, the construction of the 'other' based on 1990s divisions and the nexus has continued to exist, both in discursive as well as in 'Realpolitik'-terms (see events around Ćirilica in Vukovar, annual celebrations of the Oluja/Storm-Operation or recent commemorations of the Jasenovac concentration camp).⁴ The additional fourth field of the European refugee crisis, that played out on the border between an EU-member state (Croatia) and a candidate country for the EU-membership (Serbia) acted as a variable that shaped this conflict. The Croatian blockade of further EU-negotiations in the spring 2016 provides evidence for the intensity of this conflictual relationship between two neighbors.

A final and highly relevant additional argument in terms of nationalism and border (power) politics, as seen in the refugee crisis in the Western Balkans, can be found in the work of the Bosnian sociologist Džemal Sokolović. His argument is related to the fluctuating nature of ethnic nationalism and thus of border (power)

⁴'Ćirilica in Vukovar' refers to the conflict in the city of Vukovar over the decision of the Croatian government to implement the constitutionally guaranteed usage of the Cyrillic alphabet in public/state institutions. The official name plates of institutions written in Cyrillic were repeatedly destroyed by the local population and accompanied by sharp protests of Croatian conservative and nationalistic forces.

Oluja/Storm, was a major military operation of Croatian army in the summer of 1995 that resulted in the re-capture of Serb controlled territories in the Croatian Krajina. Croatia celebrated the date of the operation as a national holiday while the Serbian side accuses Croatia of committing major war crimes during its course.

Jasenovac concentration camp is an extermination camp established in Slavonia by the authorities of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH). The annually held commemorations are widely contested in the Croatian public, as some parts of conservative-nationalist forces in Croatia tend to deny the genocide committed in Jasenovac. The commemoration in 2016 following the victory of the conservative HDZ in the elections and was particularly disputed.

politics (Sokolović 1997). Sokolović argues that ethnic identities are prone to fluctuations, which means that phases of euphoric and hypertrophic eruptions of national identity and nationalism alternate with periods of national lethargy and indifference. The transitions from one state to the other very often take place quickly and surprisingly. Following this argument, the state of euphoric and hypertrophic eruption of national identity and nationalism can be triggered particularly rapidly and surprisingly in situations where (like in the Former Yugoslavia) a sufficient repository of nationalism and identity politics continues to shape the political arena. What we have been witnessing since the beginning of the refugee crisis is precisely this kind of trigger revealing the underlying conflicts in the region. And it is precisely in such a situation that borders are capable of ‘stirring, summoning, justifying, mobilizing, kindling and energizing’ differences (Brubaker), reinforcing the power of nationalism, and in the very end, fortifying not only existing borders but more fundamentally power positions.

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