

# Kraj



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drawings by Will Fu

Horgoš, Serbia. Pop. ~6,325  
 Kanjiža, Serbia. Pop. ~9,900  
 Preševo, Serbia. Pop. ~35,000  
 Röszke, Hungary. Pop. ~3,300  
 Subotica, Serbia. Pop. ~105,600  
 Szeged, Hungary. Pop. ~162,200  
 Belgrade, Serbia. Pop. ~1,660,000

The Slavic *kraj* translates as “land” or “border.” “Ukraine” is derived from *Okraina* or “borderland.” From the fifteenth to eighteenth century, portions of Central and South-Eastern Europe, including contemporary Romania, Hungary, Croatia, and Serbia, served as the *Vojna Krajina* or “Military Frontier” between The Hapsburg and later Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman empires. As with any region defined by frontiers, it was equally a space of contact, flow, and exchange; its history and geopolitics are defined by human mobility. The region is now the outer edge of the European Project, protecting the ostensibly post-modern, borderless Schengen Area from the “soft security threat” of unwanted migration.

The 2015–2016 refugee crisis brought a new phase in the frontier. Close to a million people transited through the region through two major routes from Turkey—across the Aegean through Greece and Macedonia, or overland through Bulgaria. The routes met in Serbia. Until September 2015 most people transited through Hungary and onward to Austria and into Europe. After Hungary closed the border with a razor-wire fence the flow shifted to Croatia and Slovenia. The “Western Balkan route” was effectively shut through cascading border closures

and an increasingly notorious deal between the EU and Turkey, which trapped 60,000 migrants in Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia.

As in previous eras, state, scholarly, and political discourses traded on grand themes of “floods” or “waves” of people crossing political, geographic, and civilizational frontiers. Like all meta-narratives, these obscure as much as they reveal. I spent six months on the route from June to December 2015 for my doctoral research on the effects of Europe’s migration policies. My goal here is to offer a picture of the localized geopolitics of the crisis.

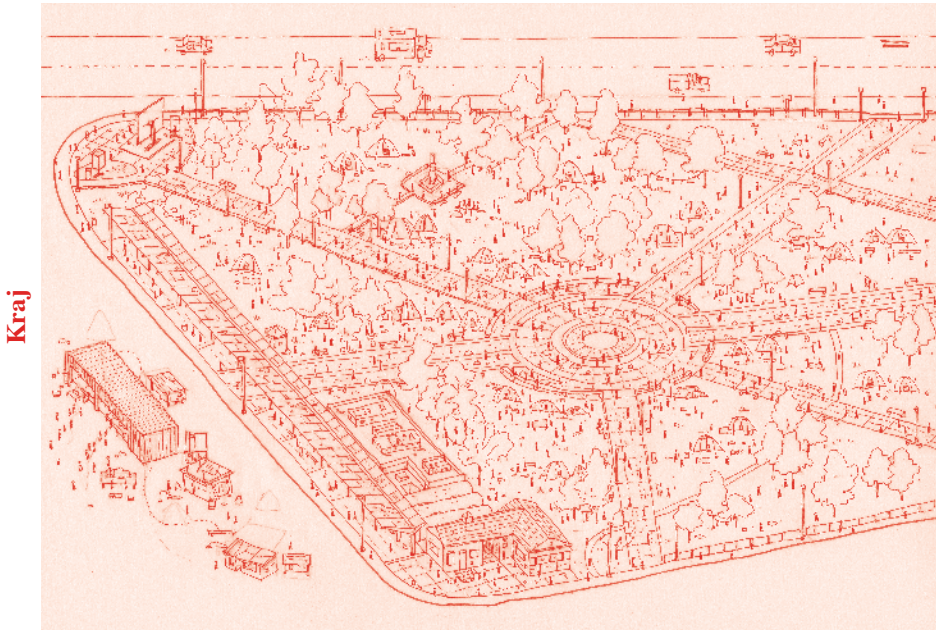
## REFUGEES AND ROMA

Train and bus stations were major hubs for migrants, volunteers, and aid organizations. The parks and ex-industrial areas around the Belgrade bus and train stations were the sites of large, makeshift camps, aid distribution centres, medical assistance, and information points. International and local aid, however, revealed a weak and unconcerned state, and fraught relationships between aid workers and existing marginalized groups.

Aid groups, activists, and established NGOs distributed local and international donations of clothing, shoes, food, and sanitary products to families in the ex-industrial/hip arts and culture area behind the Belgrade bus station. On an August afternoon I stood speaking to organizers about how civil society had come out ahead of the Serbian state to frame the narrative of the crisis as one of historical responsibility given experiences of displacement during the violent

breakup of Yugoslavia. A local Roma woman and her young child stood by the large, sliding gate, looking in at the well-organized stacks of clothing, food, and baby supplies. One of the organizers moved to shoo her away to the other side of the street. My raised eyebrow was met with a hint of shame from the organizer: “They probably need it as much as the refugees. But if you give them even a little today then tomorrow there will be dozens.”

Across the street two other women picked through discarded donations—locals looking through the unwanted second-hand clothes, sent from Europe, for people from the Middle East passing through on their way to Germany or Sweden. I moved off to smoke a cigarette. A Roma man approached holding infant. Talking fast he pulled off the child’s hat to reveal deep indents and angry surgical scars on the child’s head, then pulled up the child’s shirt to show



Kraj

more scars describing two intersecting arcs across the child’s entire abdomen. “Medicine,” he said. I handed him whatever money was in my pocket and walked across the street to join the volunteer who was showing me around. “I guess that kind of thing is shocking, but it’s pretty normal for us,” she told me. “They were always here but the refugees displaced them.”

### AN INNOCENT AMERICAN

In a smaller park across the main thoroughfare an American tourist had established (what he called) an NGO with his life’s savings. He’d planned to travel the world and find himself. Instead he found the refugee crisis. His goal, in his own words, was to “make refugees happy.” His NGO distributed food and toys in a



space that had, until the crisis, been the site of sex work and drug dealing.

As in other sites in the region, Middle-Eastern and South-Asian migrants self-segregated, with Middle-Eastern migrants using the well-organized services closer to the bus station, and Pakistani and Afghan migrants using the American's NGO. I never got to the bottom of why South-Asian migrants chose less formalized spaces.

The food, sports equipment, and arts supplies no doubt lightened the days of a good number of people, particularly children and their parents. But the NGO's operations ran contrary to all best practices in aid provision or ethics of comportment with vulnerable populations. Migrants congregating in the park were often approached by smugglers offering illicit transport to borders or over-priced accommodation, taking advantage of the lack of oversight over access to the camp.

Hearsay can have significant and pernicious consequences for migrant and refugee decision-making. Foreign volunteers in the American's NGO were quick to repeat unsubstantiated and ultimately untrue rumours about suspected border closures further along the route, creating stress and altering decisions about whether people would avail themselves of the chance to rest in state-run shelters. In one instance I stood with a Pakistani man who, because of misinformation from a volunteer, decided to rush to the Hungarian border without his extended family, who had become trapped in Bulgaria, and without retrieving his deposit from a local agent

in the international smuggling network. We kept in touch via email. His family followed around a month afterward though ended up in Sweden while he was in Germany. The last I heard he was trying to navigate the German bureaucracy for family reunification.

Informal spaces and weak organization also meant untrained volunteers acted in ways that might have seemed pleasant but were ultimately harmful. On one occasion when I visited the park, the NGO had purchased some small drums. Female volunteers (tourists from Latin America) danced with a group of young men, and soon became the centre of attention. Three men from Pakistan I was interviewing on the periphery of the park looked on in concern. "She does not realize what they think of her," said one. "The men are shaming themselves." The situation deteriorated, with a dozen men competing to take photos as they kissed them and touched their hair. When I approached the American with some aid workers his response was something like "Well, if they're going to Europe they'll have to get used to dancing with women."

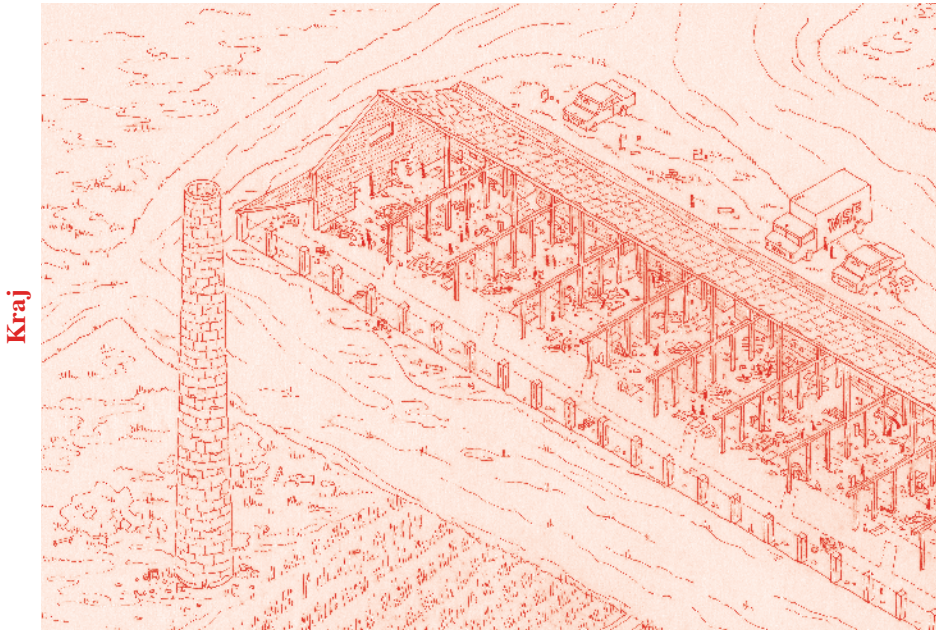
The ad hoc charity in the park had some positive economic externalities. Twice I saw Roma children collect, clean, and return discarded soccer balls to the adjacent market. So far as I could tell the innocent American then bought the same soccer balls the next day.

## BRICK FACTORY, "BORDER HUNTERS"

The mass movement of people through the Balkans made use of the

detritus of the region's post-industrial present. The disused *cigłana* (or “brick-yard”) outside the town of Subotica, twenty kilometres from the Hungarian border, had for a decade been a staging ground for smuggling across the border into Hungary after it joined the EU in 2004. The brickyard's aesthetic made it a favourite stop for journalists during the crisis—a long, red-tiled main building with sloping walls and a towering brick chimney, surrounded by farmer's fields. While in the summer migrants camped outside, in the colder months the inside of the building was full of acrid smoke and predominantly young men laying on blankets and sleeping bags amidst piles of old bricks.

As in Belgrade, migrants at the brick factory were predominantly Afghan and Pakistani, with those from the Middle East using the well-run government transit camp in the nearby town of Kanjiža. On the first afternoon I visited, in



Kraj

midsummer, spirits seemed high as young men sat around roasting corn from the surrounding fields. The Hungarian border was still open and it seemed only a matter of time before they would cross the external frontier into a borderless Europe.

As with other refugee camps and informal places I've visited during my research, a kid who spoke good English appointed himself as my guide. He showed me the tents and tarp shelters throughout the fields, the open well where they used a jerry-can on a rope to fetch water, which they boiled for cooking and bathing. Conversations revolved around fear of the Hungarian soldiers, rumours of border closures, travel time to Germany, and stories of their long, sometimes multi-year journeys though Iran, Turkey, and Bulgaria. Most had

stories of beatings, robberies, and extortion from cops, soldiers, employers, and smugglers.

I spent some time speaking with local NGO workers and eventually a pair of smugglers about the brick factory. The conversation revealed how the refugee crisis had upset long-standing smuggling models across what the EU calls its “green borders”—sites away from official crossings—in which both Serbian and Hungarian border guards had long been an active part. Hungarian border police, responsible for Europe’s most-crossed “external” borders and the site of the most smuggling and trafficking, are the lowest paid in the EU. Border guards in Luxembourg, a country surrounded by other EU states, are the highest paid. The smugglers attributed lost incomes from smuggling as the reason for the increasing violence from the Hungarian border guards. Thousands of people walking across green borders every day meant it was no longer necessary to pay for information for soldiers to look the other way.

By September Hungary would finish a fence along the entirety of its border with Serbia, build a series of prison-like transit camps, criminalize physical contact with the fence, and make it legal to apprehend migrants anywhere inside Hungary and dump them back over the border into Serbia.

I visited the brickyard again in November. The mood was much darker, and the choices about crossing more grim. Two (rather slight, teen-aged) Afghan boys recounted being surrounded by a group of Hungarian

cops who, after stealing their cash and phones, then took turns holding them up to punch and kick them in the legs and stomach before dumping them across the border. They had been recuperating at the brickyard for over a week. Both had severe bruising and limped badly, and one was extensively bandaged around his torso. An MSF physician explained that he had suffered internal hemorrhaging but refused to visit a hospital.

Roughly 10,000 migrants remain trapped in Serbia, most living rough in disused factories around the country in lieu of registering for asylum and staying in state-run shelters because of fears of being refused asylum in Europe. The closure of the Hungarian border (and later the route through Croatia) meant the need, once again, to make use of smugglers, though without co-operative border guards. Those now trying to cut through the fence face a new, zealous, government-trained paramilitary called *Határvédelem*—literally “border hunters,” tasked (according to Hungary’s government) with protecting the Magyar nation, and European civilization, from the threat of Islam.

## BORDER COPS AND SMUGGLERS ON HORSEBACK

Migrants crossed the border to Hungary near the town of Horgoš, with those from the Middle East leaving from the government transit camp in Kanjiža. The camp was closed to journalists, and I’d gained access by tagging along with contacts from a humanitarian NGO. Most of the tents bore Russian flags—a hint at the tug

of war over the Balkans between Europe and its interminable legal and justice reform, and Russia, with its looser money and promise of maintaining dignity and pride in Orthodox culture.

In two months the green border would be closed, the site of major clashes and violence between Hungarian cops and migrants, pushing the route to Croatia as the weather and politics turned. On this day the weather was sunny and warm, with groups of dozens or hundreds of people banding together at the camp to walk across green fields to the Hungarian border. Idyllic in contrast to what the route would become.

I sat on a bench in a row of tents with Syrian and Iraqi men over ever-present cigarettes and transit papers, hearing stories of violence at the hands of the Turkish and Macedonian border guards, parsing rumours about how quickly



they would be allowed to pass through Hungary to Austria. Two Syrian brothers, 19 and 20, showed me bullet wounds in their arms and thighs from when Turkish soldiers had peppered their boat with bullets after it had left the shore near Izmir in the Aegean. A younger boy, who'd taken a liking to me because of my inadequate and broken Arabic, stared out to the edge of the camp. There, an adolescent Roma kid, bare-chested and riding a pony bareback, pranced around the outer perimeter of camp—back and forth, coming in and out of view between the tents. The boy tilted his head, asking if I wanted to look. And so we walked to the fence, and watched the kid on the horse watch us.

An official from the camp in one of the ubiquitous khaki vests of big aid organizations offered the following explanation: “They used to act as guides

up to the border but they've lost their business. He's looking for stragglers from the big groups or people who think they are smart and want to know the secret route. But there are no secret routes. If they get a chance they'll drive the migrants in circles all night and drop them off in the middle of nowhere."

An hour later I watched as a group of around a hundred people set off on foot from the camp. Returning to my rental car with the NGO workers we drove through Horgoš then along an access road on a raised berm to the green border. Groups of migrants sat in the grass on the tree-lined side. We stopped the car on the Serbian side of the no-man's land and walked into the liminal space, up to the stone markers at the Hungarian border, observing a group of about twenty border cops stopping migrants and making them sit on the ground, to be loaded into buses and taken to processing camps. A group of three cops ambled over, two of them tall, muscular, and bored; the one in charge was fat and bald with his gun strapped to his thigh to avoid his heaving gut. They became less friendly when we declined to hand over our passports. The fat one stepped forward to intimidate us, pointing back to the Serbian marker stones. The interaction ended when a group of migrants walked up the side of the berm behind them toward the border. The fat cop shouted and tried to run after them, steadying his bouncing gun with one hand and holding up his pants with the other.

On my way back to Belgrade I stopped again at the bus station in Subotica to have a coffee

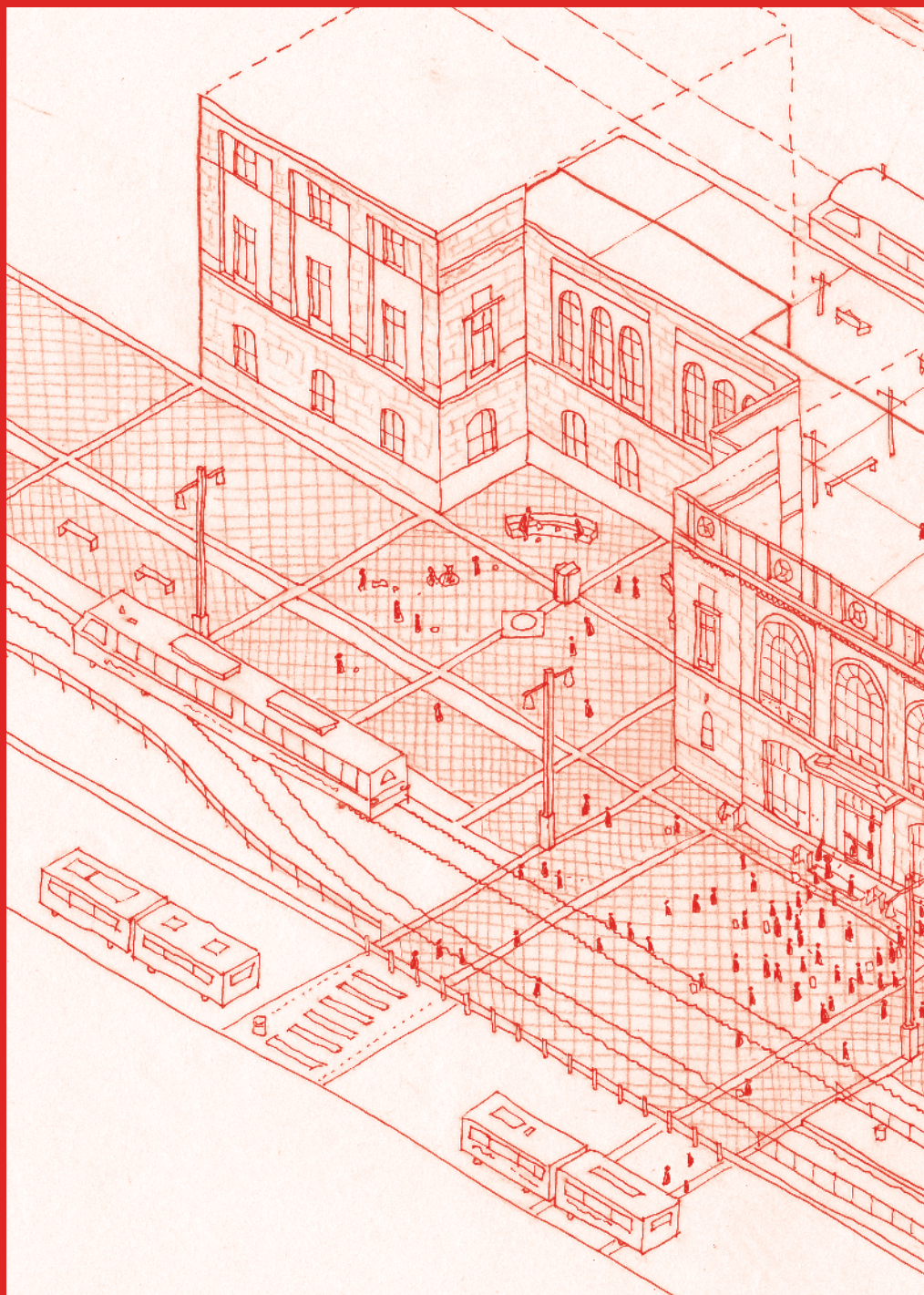
with a Norwegian journalist friend. Migrants sat around the floor charging their smartphones and GPS devices, kids playing or clinging to their parents. An agitated Syrian man approached us; he spoke good English, fluent French, and some Italian. He wanted to know who we were and if we could offer advice.

He presented us with a series of business cards from his past work with the UN, the Syrian government, German and French tech companies. He refused to walk across the green border with his family because of the danger from Hungarian police, but more because of a desire to retain his dignity. Though he had a German credit card, sent by a brother who lived in Hamburg, he'd been refused a rental car in Belgrade. Taxis refused to drive him to the regular border crossing. He wanted to claim asylum in the EU at an official border, and didn't want the charity at the transit camp. His dignity, concern for his family, and desire to abide by the letter of international law left him trapped at a bus station in a nothing town in Northern Serbia.

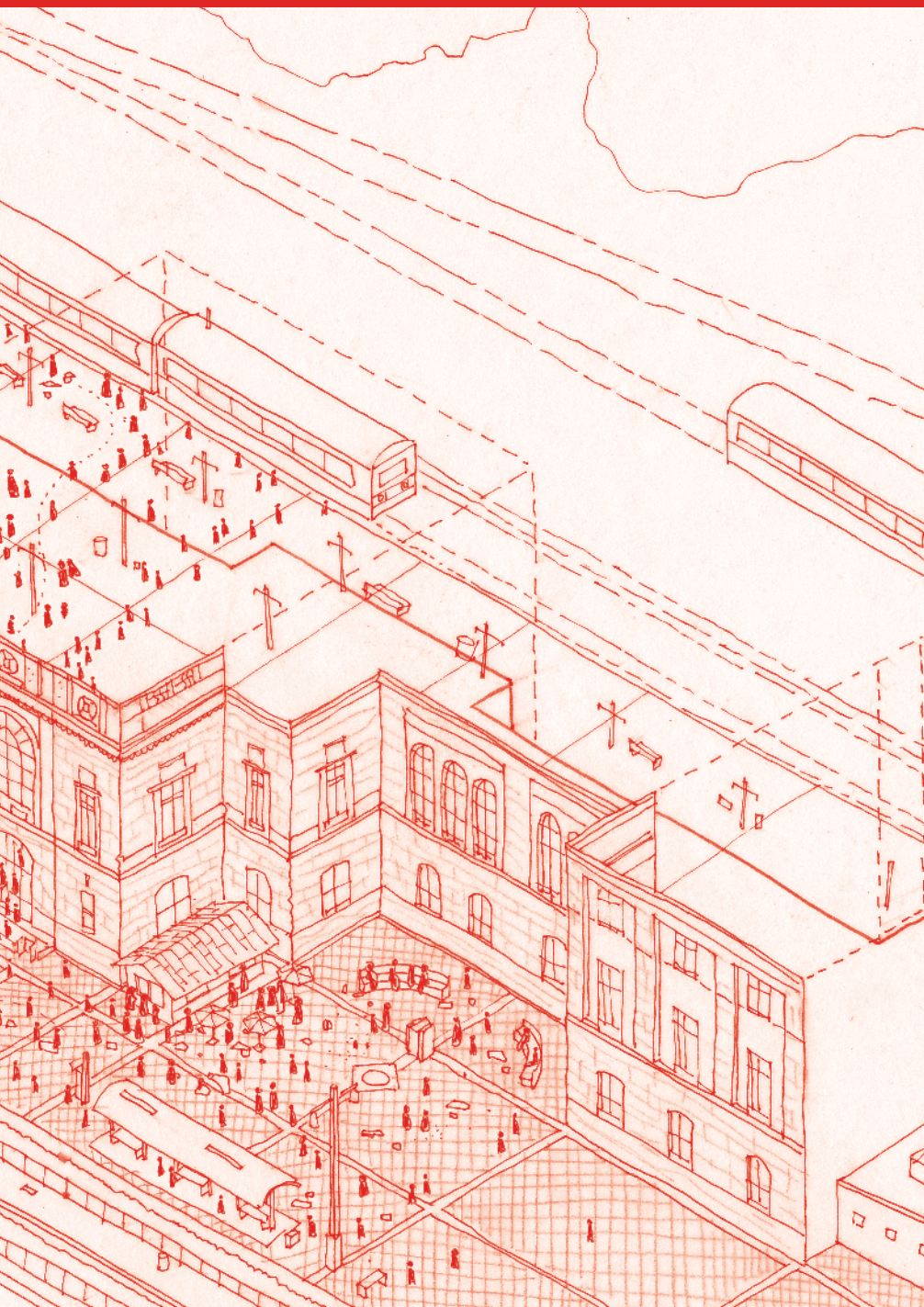
## THE SANITIZED TRAIN STATION

In the square in front of the train station in Szeged, Hungary, volunteers from the group Migszol organized a reception and rest station. By this point Hungary was detaining all migrants in processing centres. Those who were released arrived at the train station to move north toward Budapest. I watched as a group of buses arrived, disgorging several dozen families. They drank bottled









water, ate some sandwiches, charged their phones—the Migszol volunteers showing them maps and explaining the next leg of the journey. When the train arrived they formed orderly lines and were off again towards Budapest—all smiles and hugs with the volunteers.

The moment they left, the volunteers donned blue latex gloves and pulled out buckets, bottles, rags, and set to spraying and wiping down all the benches and surfaces in the square as if sanitizing a hospital or professional kitchen. The scene was like something from an absurdist film. The Migszol organizer told me a delegation from different levels of government, all representatives of Viktor Órban’s ruling Fidesz party, had visited the square a month before and demanded the volunteers develop a sanitization plan to prevent the spread of communicable diseases.



Kraj

Most of the organizers were also active in wider resistance to Hungary’s deepening authoritarianism. The organizer I was with said the sanitization was a small act of theatre and complicity in the dehumanization of asylum seekers as the cost of compassion and hospitality. “We play this charade so the government lets us continue to operate.” I stayed at the station for the next several hours, watching the cycle repeat.

Two years later, in Toronto, I moderated a panel about the “front lines” of the crisis. An official from the Governor of Consgrád County (of which Szeged is the regional capital) gave a presentation about Hungary’s victimhood—from the EU, George Soros, the conspiracy to flood Europe with Muslims—using debunked statistics on the number of asylum seekers who stayed in the country and

the financial costs to the Hungarian state. Amid uncomfortable shifting in seats she moved on to discuss the filth refugees left behind, their phony asylum claims, and how Hungary's reputation of abusing migrants was, in fact, an artifice of the international media—fake news, as it were.

Her final slide was a staged photograph of a pile of refuse typical to the crisis—discarded blankets, water bottles, broken backpacks, half-eaten sandwiches—with a fuzzy, brown teddy bear placed neatly on the top of the pile. “This is how the Muslims treat their children.” Seemingly unsatisfied at the audible groans and face palms in the room, she added, “They don’t even finish the food we give them.”

#### BUS TOUTS AND BORED SOLDIERS

At the far South of Serbia on the Macedonian border, the town of Preševo served as the staging point for migrants moving up through the country to Europe. Refugees crossed from Macedonia by train, then walked across several miles of relatively barren land to a makeshift refugee camp for processing and then transported on to Preševo. They were fingerprinted using specialized EU biometric machines and screened against security lists from Europol and Interpol, then offered shelter and food.

Preševo is also the major transportation hub for goods into Kosovo. The location of the camp along the main road had upset that trade, leading to a series of demonstrations. Refugees were offered the choice between a free, once-daily train to

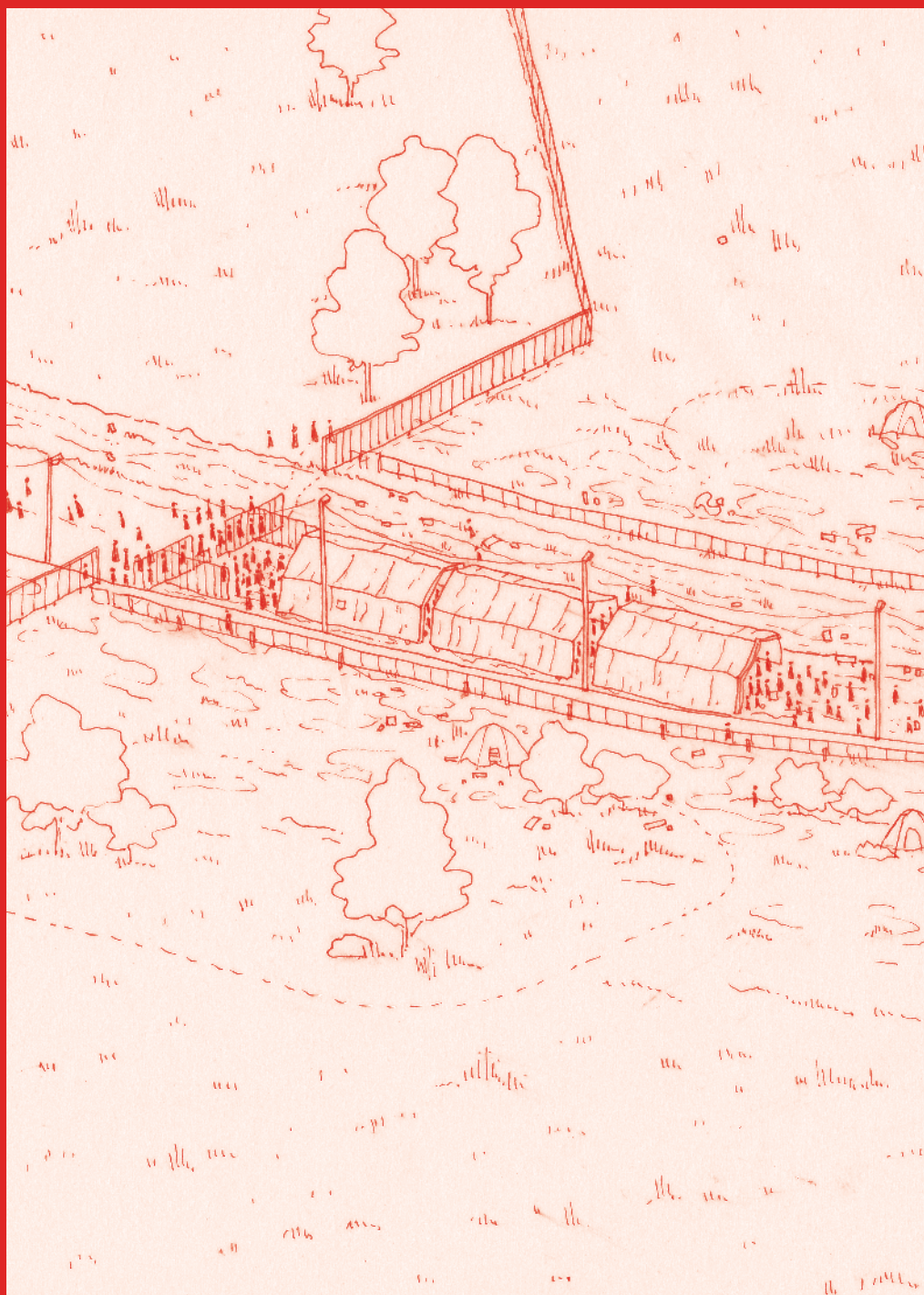
Belgrade, or a line-up of buses for prices ranging from €20-50 per passenger. Aggressive touts lined up outside the camp, pulling people toward different buses and shouting prices in English and Arabic.

I was told by two journalists and a local hire of Serbia's Commissariat for Refugees that the micro-economy of touts was simply an allowance for the local hardship imposed by the camp. Personnel from the UN refugee agency, a Belgrade academic, and local NGOs told me the bus companies were owned by close friends and political connections of Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić. If we imagine that only half the refugees on the route took the buses at the lowest price available, then the transport companies grossed at least ten million Euros effectively smuggling refugees (under the strict letter of EU law—which Serbia was supposed to adhere to as a condition of their process of EU membership) from one border to the next.

As I was leaving Preševo a journalist told me all the governmental ministers responsible for handling the refugee flows through Serbia were visiting the forward processing camp near the Macedonian border. I drove down a small country road, over rolling hills, to what my GPS told me was the site of the border camp. I suppose I took a wrong turn, and ended up on a road that dead-ended at a machine-gun nest on the border near Kosovo. Two soldiers climbed out as I stopped the car.

Like most soldiers I've encountered through several years of field research, the ones at this out-of-the-way









border post were young and bored. They carried their rifles slung low at their backs. I opened the conversation with cigarettes—a tried and true research method. In this instance, however, the cigarettes were loaded with meaning. My soft pack of Drinas, produced in what is now Bosnia, were the iconic cigarette of Tito's partisans and Yugoslav identity, then became the cigarette of the Bosnian resistance, and were now the cigarette of the elderly, the poor, the politically turned-on. The Serb soldiers laughed and hit one another, then me, when I offered the pack. They lit them while leaning on my car, passing the pack back and forth for inspection. We made stunted conversation for a while, the soldiers asking me if the migrants were all Muslims, laughing and saying they should go to Kosovo or Bosnia instead of Serbia. When we got bored we looked at the countryside. They told me I'd missed the turn-off to the refugee camp, pointing it out on my phone. Before we parted I gave them a fresh pack of Drinas from a plastic bag in the back seat of my rental car with Sarajevo plates.

### THE CZECH TEAMS

When Hungary's border closure diverted the flow toward Croatia in September 2015, the green border in the rural area of Berkasovo/Bapska (near the main border crossing at Šid) became the scene of significant chaos and hardship for migrants. Not only because of the onset of bad weather, but because the Serbian state had decided to sit back and let Croatia feel some of the pain of the migration crisis, leaving management of the Serbian border to NGOs and volunteers (eventually the stance led to an eight-day trade war).

Buses from Preševo went directly to Šid so as to keep migrants from convening in the centre of Belgrade. Sometimes dozens of buses would line up two kilometres down the rural road from the border, waiting to unload passengers, with police sometimes keeping people confined in buses for up to twelve hours. For over two weeks volunteers up the road at the border had no indication of how many would arrive. It fell to international organizations, aid agencies, and private volunteers to transport disabled, infirmed, or elderly people up the road where the world's big organizations had established emergency operations. The last 500 metres of road was sunken between farm fields, and covered in long tents, creating an outdoor corridor, the ground covered in cast-off blankets, food wrappers, luggage, and toys, all caked together in mud.

After some early rushes the Croatian authorities set up fencing and sent riot police into the no-man's land. In the first week I spent at the border two Serbian cops stood by on the high ground above the sunken road, smoking cigarettes, sipping tea. Facilitating crossing on the Serbian side fell to volunteers, the largest contingent being a group of roughly 30–40 Czechs, identifiable by their neon vests, with the words "Czech Team" written across the back.

The Czech Team was originally to provide hot tea, food, blankets, and some shelter, while also undertaking the majority of the clean-up—a daunting task in itself. As the situation escalated they took on crowd control, identifying urgent family reunification and emergency medical triage, eventually receiving

permission from the Croatian police to cross back and forth over the border. On several occasions the scene edged towards violence as groups and individuals attempted to push through. It was often left to the Czech Team to quell scuffles while Serbian police looked on.<sup>2</sup>

For all intents and purposes these young volunteers managed the movement of people across an international boundary at a geographically, politically, and temporally pivotal point of the refugee crisis, while the staggering images of tens of thousands of migrants en route to Europe dominated international media. In a very real way this is one of the truest and universal stories from the period: volunteers, rather than states, managing the response to what became a crisis of the European project.

#### “CITIZEN JOURNALISTS”

The lack of oversight left room for less well-intentioned interventions. On the same border I witnessed German “citizen journalists” forcing their way past families to the front of a desperate fray. One filmed while the other shouted about open borders at an increasingly agitated line of riot police. After being pushed out of the crowd they filmed a mother who had fainted in front of her children and husband. They were never approached by the Serbian police standing five metres away, and continued to film until surrounded by a group of younger Syrian men.

I witnessed two other cases where unaccredited journalists from Western Europe endangered vulnerable populations. In one, a self-

described “activist journalist” from Belgium caused significant distress among a group of Afghan migrants at the Subotica brickyard by filming as a smuggler arrived in the camp. The smuggler left when he saw the camera, to the deep consternation of the migrants who had already paid him.

Finally, in July, I watched from the outskirts of the transit camp in Kanjiža as a British and Dutch pair embedded themselves in a group of roughly 200 migrants en route to the Hungarian border. Having been refused entry to the camp, the “journalists” said they planned to cross the border to “see what the Hungarians do to EU citizens.” When a member of an IGO pointed out they were not trying to claim asylum and so would cross the border illegally, they responded with “borders are violence” and said Schengen was supposed to be open, and then pulled out their passports. The Dutch kid’s rucksack had a badge reading “No Fortress Europe.” I believe the irony was lost on him. The last I saw they were walking alongside a group of refugees, very much not blending in.