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The Real Appearance of the Economic/Political  
Binary: Claiming Asylum in Bulgaria

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### Abstract

The paper examines the distinction between ‘economic’ migrants and ‘genuine refugees’. I argue that the economic/political migrant binary belongs to a particular ideological presupposition which is present in classic economic liberalism. In migratory systems, this ideology construes the ‘economic’ and the ‘political’ vis-à-vis violence and lays the ground for subject differentiation. This logic, furthermore, imposes itself on the migratory system and its empirical reality (e.g. detention and reception centres). The struggles that we witness at borders and detention centres attempt to disintegrate definitions of what constitutes violence. The struggles against the imposed categories take place at two interconnected levels: at the border and in the repositioning of migrants from detention to reception centres. I empirically trace these levels within the practice of the asylum-system in Bulgaria.

*Keywords:* economic/political migrants, asylum, Bulgaria, liberalism, violence.

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## *Introduction*

In 2015's 'refugee crisis', a language came about that was missing before. It is the regular use of the words 'refugees' and 'migrants' side by side.<sup>1</sup> This language is an effect of the differentiation between political and economic migrants, which is embedded in the ways liberal thought empties the economy of political content and perpetuates a separation of two distinct spheres; that of the political and that of the economic. When migrants reach European shores, they need to demonstrate of which type they are: of the type that is running away from political violence or of the type that is escaping economic misfortunes.

Although the so-called refugee crisis was temporarily situated in the summer of 2015, the context of the above events is common and has long taken root within the European Asylum System. We are right to conclude with Prem Rajaram (2015) that the 'crisis was fabricated' and with Bojadžijev and Mezzadra (2015) that it was in fact a 'crisis of the European migration policies'. I shall add a layer, however, and insist that the crisis was also a crisis of liberal definitions of what constitutes violence and who has the right to escape it. I will look into this specific aspect of the European asylum system: the separation between genuine refugees and economic migrants. This mechanism of separation embodies the rationale behind the European asylum system in its entirety and is related to larger historical formations whose content structures the appearance of violence in liberal democracies. I approach the separation from a position at the edge of Europe, Bulgaria. The country's (geopolitical) location is such that it is burdened with the obligation to secure Europe and hence, to strain the 'economic' from the 'political'. The process of straining reproduces a specific type of what I will refer to as 'trickster', who is arrested between the two distinctions of 'economic' migrants and 'genuine refugees'. Identifying tricksters is the basis of the current asylum infrastructure in the country.

This paper is as much about the formation of the possibility to think migrants as either political or economic, as it is about the struggles that we witness at European borders (i.e. at the physical borders, but also in detention and registration camps). These struggles unfold accordingly on the ground, in order to either defend or disintegrate the effects of contemporary definitions of violence. I trace them within the practice of the asylum-system in Bulgaria – firstly, at the level of border crossing and

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<sup>1</sup> The conclusions here are based on data that were collected between 2011 and 2015. Interviews and in-depth conversations have been conducted with diverse parties ranging from refugees, asylum-seekers, illegalized migrants, activists and volunteers, UNHCR, human rights organizations in Bulgaria, IOM Bulgaria, experts in the field of asylum, and lawyers. The interviews with asylum-seekers that appear here were taken during a research trip to Pastrogor and also as part of a research for the project 'Trapped in Europe's Quagmire: The Situation of Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Bulgaria', written by myself, Neda Deneva, Mathias Fiedler and Tsvetelina Hristova, and sponsored by Stiftung:do and BMU. See Hristova et al. (2014). I have entered the field both in my capacity as a PhD researcher and as part of my political work. The stories collected here do not follow a chronological order. The separation between 'economic' and 'political' migrants does not concern solely the field of migration per se. It is part of larger forms of historical oppressions. Its representation as arrested in the field of migration happened to be the clearest at this point of time.

secondly, at the level of detention and the subsequent relocation to reception camps. The body of the trespasser in our case is always already perceived as the body of an economic migrant, and therefore guilty of illegal crossing. After a successful crossing, the asylum-seeker, who is always assumed to be an 'economic migrant', is placed in detention. The struggles here consist in the desire to reposition oneself from detention to reception. This guarantees that asylum-seekers will have the chance to prove that they belong to the 'political' category of migration and erase their 'economic' and hence 'illegal' appearance; a process that takes place at the reception camp.

### *The logic behind violence and its historical position in the production of political/economic migrants*

The possibility to segregate economic migrants from refugees at the European borders stems from the tendency to maintain that there is a non-correspondence between the 'political' and the 'economic'. In our contemporaneity, it seems, we cannot talk of one of the sides of the political/economic migration binary without necessarily negating its opposite. Why?

The economic/political migrant binary is oxymoronic in its nature, and it belongs to a particular ideological presupposition readily available to liberalism, i.e. the ways the latter construes the 'economic' and the 'political' vis-à-vis violence.<sup>2</sup> Economic liberalism disembods the 'economic' from the 'political' by detaching coercion from processes of production, distribution and allocation, which makes 'the economy' appear as force-free. The elements that enable this particular ideological presupposition have been translated by the economic/political migrant binary so as to accommodate the two central notions of the political and the economic under liberalism: that of the political being violent and that of the economic being voluntary.

Building on Marx's account on private property's historical development into a pure economic form, Ellen Wood (1981; 2007) presents us with an explanation of the stakes and historical developments concerning the separation of the 'economic' sphere from the political. Partially, one such separation concerns the ways in which (the appearance of) violence is being structured. What Wood demonstrates is that the uniqueness of capitalism shall be traced in the ways in which 'property-and-class-relations, as well as the functions of surplus appropriation and distribution, so to speak liberate themselves from - and yet are served by - the coercive institutions that constitute the state, and develop autonomously'. Such 'liberation' implicates the extraction of surplus labour (see Rioux's critique) which suddenly undertakes a solely

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<sup>2</sup> Liberalism here refers to the ideology that calls for free markets and private property in the means of production. This idea model is characterized by depoliticization of the 'economy', as grounded in classical economics. Simultaneously, the regulation of movement has been critical for the formation of liberal thought (for an exhaustive account on this, see Kotef [2015]). Relying on the development of the asylum system in Europe, we can see that the separation of spheres dictates the inner logics of movement regulation. In contemporary liberalism, movement regulation has been translated accordingly to the desired disintegration of the economy from the political and the asylum systems throughout European liberal democracies are reproducing this distinction.

economic form and the political coercion previously at work in its extraction is now removed from the relation between capital and labour. In this sense, economic categories such as ‘poverty’ and ‘unemployment’ (of which economic migrants are often accused of escaping) appear as if free of violence. Rioux (2013) argues that political Marxism (or the characterization of capitalism as marked by economic coercion in surplus extraction and of which Wood is representative) presents us with a ‘sanitized conception’ of capitalist relations and reproduces a bourgeois understanding of the market – or precisely one such understanding that the economic is marked out of the political, where extra-economic violence disappears from capitalist relations. Rioux’s critique is crucial. When one is to consider the existence of different forms of labour and surplus labour extraction in relation to capital, the persistence of different forms of dependence and slavery under capitalism, then, indeed, speaking of ‘economic’ and ‘extra-economic’ coercion becomes dubious<sup>3</sup>.

The ‘economic migrant’ is the representation par excellence of this dubiousness. If we place the notion of the economic migrant in the midst of debates of whether economic coercion is a feasible notion that describes the structure of violence under capital relations, then we see that the ideal-typical conception of the European liberal state and its migration regime are here to convince us that the social has two parts. One is marked by political violence only and the authentic refugee escapes that. The other part is constituted by economic relations that are political-violence-free. These economic relations are preserved for those who consciously migrate out of an entity (e.g. nation-state) in order to better their lives<sup>4</sup>.

Despite Rioux’s critique, however, we can see that this construction persists in its real effects. The separation of the ‘economic’ from political coercion, thus, becomes a field of struggle. The economic/political migrantness is its real appearance (Marx, 1857/1993; Hall, 2003), i.e. the effect of the ideological construction that the market is violence-free. The aforementioned struggles unfold in the terrain of this real appearance. This allows us to think of the European migration regime and its concrete practices in the state forms of detention, push-backs, and asylum procedures as the attempted sustaining of the apparent separation of violences. These relations structure the appearance of violence, which now emerges as possible to define only when its manifestation is of ‘political’ nature. Yet, the economic migrant/refugee binary is oxymoronic in a sense. It is oxymoronic not because it is paradoxical but because it creates its own terms.<sup>5</sup> As Rioux applies it, the separation of economic and political is an impossible dualism but it is also a desirable condition of freedom under

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<sup>3</sup> For details on the debate see *inter alia*, Thompson (1978), Anderson ([1980] 2016), Barker (1997), Banaji (2010).

<sup>4</sup> The UNHCR defines the economic migrant as follows: “Global migration patterns have become increasingly complex in modern times, involving not just refugees, but also millions of economic migrants. But refugees and migrants, even if they often travel in the same way, are fundamentally different, and for that reason are treated very differently under modern international law. Migrants, especially economic migrants, choose to move in order to improve the future prospects of themselves and their families. Refugees have to move if they are to save their lives or preserve their freedom (UNHCR website, accessed February 2016.)”

<sup>5</sup> I borrow this insight of the ‘oxymoronic’ from Lecercle’s (2016) review of Virno’s *Grammar of the Multitude*, who in turn relies on Simondon.

liberal ideologies. If the process of 'creating terms' assumes the existence of conflict and struggle, then let us read the relation between the economic and the political as an oxymoron, as always antagonistic. The surplus of that conflictual relation is locked in the 'economic migrant', explicitly defined by the UN refugee convention as the opposite of the refugee; a construction that creates the possibility to divide moving bodies into such that exhibit economic voluntarism and such that exhibit political coercion. Then, we can treat the political/economic (migrant) binary not as a 'real' separation but as an illusion to be sustained.

This illusion was persuasive during the time of the development of the so-called refugee regime. According to Karatani (2005), two approaches to migration confronted each other in 1951 and produced the model of migration management that was to govern international movements in the next decades. Namely, the International Labor Organization's 'international coordination approach' and the US 'functional operation principle'. In 1947, the common understanding regarding 'migration problems' was that the ILO, in cooperation with the UN, shall have the permanent mandate to deal with 'problems of an economic and social nature' stemming from migrating populations (ILO as cited in Karatani, 2005). The secondary organizations (e.g. International Bank for Development and Reconstruction, World Health Organization, the Food and Agricultural Organization) were supposed to take control over 'incidental' situations (*ibid.*). One such secondary organization was the Preparatory Commission of the International Refugee Organization, which speaks of *generality* as a defining feature of migration and *incidental* as a defining feature of refuge. This approach towards international movements has permanently settled<sup>6</sup>. In a way, migration was acknowledged in its permanency, its particularities, however, (i.e. workers' transfers, refugee movements) were framed as 'incidents' to be dealt with by secondary organizations.

Eventually, the Secretariat Levels of the UN and the ILO agreed upon division of labour between the two bodies as follows: 'I. The competence of the International Labour Organization should include the rights and situation of migrants in their quality as workers...II. The competence of the United Nations should include: rights and situation of migrants in their quality as aliens.'<sup>7</sup> We see that from the very coining of the separation, the aliens, later to become refugees, were scrutinized as if they do not hold labour-power. In this way the refugee was disarticulated from the worker and the violence attached to political persecution erased from movements of labour power<sup>8</sup>. The alien retained the 'political' and the worker retained the 'economic'. As Karatani (*ibid.*: 524) writes, 'the rights and situation of "migrants" were compartmentalised into two: those aspects of migrants as *workers* fell under the mandate of the ILO, whereas those as *aliens*, the UN' (*italics of the author*). In the

<sup>6</sup> Just think of the way the Guestworker programmes in the 1950s in Germany were organized - namely with the idea that eventually the foreign workers would leave and not settle down.

<sup>7</sup> ILO, 'Note concerning the Co-ordination of International Responsibility in the Field of Migration, Agreed on the Secretariat Level between the United Nations and the International Labour Organization.' 1947. 30 *Official Bulletin*: 419

<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to point out that this approach is retained in the political movements that organize around issues of flight.

next few years, international coordination was to be organized under the above mandate. Additionally, the notion of the refugee was for the first time individualized, meaning that the supposed collective basis as implied in previous conceptions of the term withered away<sup>9</sup>.

More than 60 years later, we see that the implementation of the regime has left undeniable historical traces. The asylum systems in Europe are sustained through it. 'Safe countries', 'bogus asylum-seekers', 'genuine refugee' are all notions that bend under the weight of liberal ideologies, whose legitimacy is sustained in the validity of almost impossible border crossing, detention and reception camps. The countries at the so-called external borders are the first instances where one's political or economic appearance is being determined. One such external border is Bulgaria; a country that did not receive much attention during the so-called 'refugee crisis'. Yet, fence building, men hunting, push-backs and long term detention were all practices that unfolded between 2013 and 2015, making Bulgaria the prototype of what took place elsewhere a year later.

### *Tracing economic migrants in Bulgaria*

Asylum-systems have been studied as border regimes (Tsianos et al., 2009; Tsianos and Karakayali, 2010; Kasperek, 2016), approached from the perspective of the autonomy of migration (Papadopolous and Tsianos, 2007; Mezzadra, 2011; Cortes-Casas et al., 2015), from the point of view of its contradictions (Guiraudon, 2003), as humanitarian reason (Fassin, 2012; Ticktin, 2011), externalization/Europeization in its normative dimension (Toshkov and de Haan, 2013), to name just a few approaches. These paths have informed tremendously our knowledge of asylum systems but my goal here is different. I assume that the knowledge practice of distinguishing economic migrants from refugees is instrumental in the asylum knowledge formation from the perspective of two modes of hoping. One is the point of view of the border custodians (e.g. border guards, translators, interviewers, judges) who hope to protect against economic migrants. The other is the point of view of those who cross the border and hope to convince the former that they are not economic migrants. These two modes of hoping clash. After Bloch, Benjamin and Rorty, Miyazaki (2004) notes that hope is a method that serves 'radical temporal reorientation of knowledge'. The clash between these two seemingly different, yet subordinated to the same rationale reorientations of knowledge, between the practice of the guardians and the migrants perpetuate their antagonistic counterparts. These two hopes form an antagonistic terrain, where they 'unite different ways of knowing' that are nonetheless informed by the attempts to sustain or disintegrate the difference between what is 'economic' and what is 'political'. Asylum-systems throughout the EU are built to accommodate space for such reorientation.

Bulgaria's transition to a liberal-democratic state required a substantial change in its definition of asylum. Rositza Guentcheva (2012: 12) demonstrates that the excitement accompanying the initial debates regarding the notion of a refugee, did not

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<sup>9</sup> We see that such predicaments do not hold water, however. The concept of SIA (Syrian-Iraqi-Afghani) is a prime example of states' failure to attain to universalistic claims.

last for long. Already in 1991, the fear of the possibility to have ‘economic’ migrants entering Bulgarian territory captivated members of parliament<sup>10</sup>. Guentcheva argues that, ‘[such fears] would form the basis for a new understanding of refugees as bogus [*фалшиви*] refugees’ (ibid: 14). Bulgaria’s transition was conditioned upon a specific understanding of who is to be admitted and perpetuated the economic/political binary from the very beginning.

In 1992, Bulgaria ratified the Geneva Convention on the status of refugees and that same year it opened the National Bureau for Territorial Asylum and Refuge, which was renamed to Agency for Refugees in 2000 and to State Agency for Refugees (SAR) in 2002 (SAR, 2016). After a series of legal and infrastructural changes (e.g. the introduction of detention centres that hold foreigners only in 2006), Bulgaria is now part of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). As other countries within the System, its asylum procedures and policies are subordinated to international and EU law precept. According to Bulgarian and international law, every foreigner has the right to submit an asylum application, in both cases of legal and illegal crossing. This can be done before every state representative but only SAR officially registers applications. According to the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC, 2016), the majority of the asylum applications are submitted to Border Police (at the border) and to the Migration Directorate (in the detention centres). This is due to the fact that for the most part asylum-seekers cross the state border illegally (usually from Turkey by land) and are subject to arrest and detention. Prior to 2016, the detention of asylum-seekers was against the norms required by Law, yet, in 2016 the latter was amended in order to introduce such a possibility (Ilareva, 2015; 2016). The amendment followed a regularly reported malpractice from previous years where asylum-seekers were regularly detained despite their submission of an asylum application (which can take place both in a written and oral form). Even though Bulgarian law did not provide any explicit basis for detention of asylum-seekers (Global Detention Project, 2011) this was a common practice in the country, and one that pertained mostly to the grey area of the law. This grey area is now legitimated and in it the conflict that pertains to the political/economic migrants unfolds spatially.

The asylum system in Bulgaria is not centralized. The two main institutions responsible in the field of asylum are SAR, which is under the auspices of the Council of Ministers, and the Ministry of Interior, which guards the borders and manages the detention centres for foreigners. There are such centres in Busmantsi (near Sofia), Elhovo and in Lyubimets (close to the border with Greece and Turkey). Their name, Special Homes for the Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners reveals a juridical system that does not like thinking of itself as if it ‘detains’; instead it provides shelter. SAR, on the other hand, manages the so-called reception centres, which accommodate people whose asylum application had been accepted. There are seven of these centres: four of them in Sofia (Ovcha Kupel, Vrajdebna, Voenna Rampa, Kovachevtsi), two of them close to the Turkish-Bulgarian border (Harmanli and Pastrogor) and one situated in Central Bulgaria (Banya). SAR is also the institution that decides whether or not one is a true refugee in the first instance. There is, indeed,

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<sup>10</sup> Bulgaria was declared to be a safe country that same year, ultimately turning thousands of Bulgarian asylum-seekers abroad into economic migrants.

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a strong institutional relation between these two despite their relative autonomy, which often ends in the practice of migrant exchange. Here, I deal precisely with this type of exchange; the repositioning of people from the border to the detention centres and afterwards to the reception centres. This reposition captures the manifestation of the political/economic binary and its effects on migrating bodies<sup>11</sup>.

Once captured, people can stay in detention for months before being placed in a reception centre, where eventually their request for asylum will come under scrutiny. In the meantime, a definitional vacuum is established, as in most cases people who are detained have expressed their desire to claim asylum in Bulgaria: an utterance that, by law, is enough for one to be considered for refugee status.<sup>12</sup>

Moving a migrant from detention to reception repositions one from being considered an illegal migrant to legalized asylum-seeker. The asylum infrastructure in the country can be said to be comprised of temporal and spatial loops that bring one closer to the possibility to claim asylum. The reposition between these loops brings migrants closer to a point of potentiality, the not-yet-actual asylum, yet, the very possibility that one has the chance to be considered a 'genuine' refugee. This type of practice is necessary in order for supposed 'economic migrants' to remain, they have to change their appearance from an economic to a political migrant<sup>13</sup>. The appearance could be changed by the stories that they would eventually present to the state in order for the latter to declare them true or false. These stories have one goal: to convince SAR that one is not an economic migrant. This boundary also shapes political struggles to a large degree as it creates a vacuum within which a competition is being established between the different categories of migrations as they are differentially included within legal systems, labour markets, healthcare services and the welfare state.

The asylum infrastructure at place in Bulgaria has been developed in order to track economic migrants. This is especially pronounced in light of Bulgaria's role as a guardian of the external borders of the Union; a role that has been taken very seriously by all political parties in the country. Such asylum systems employ forms of knowledge that speak to the old anthropological archetype of the figure of the trickster: 'complicated characters, as they easily slip and slide between one extreme to the next' (Nadelberg, 2008: 8). This type of knowledge practice, both in terms of facilitation and outward effects, valorizes different forms of intelligence within the asylum system itself: interviewers, translators, detention and reception camps, psychologists, and even smugglers and 'story sellers' that operate before the reaching of the border. The above is what comprises the 'asylum-seeking' process: a temporal framework set aside for being potentially pronounced a refugee or being turned into an economic migrant. This temporal space is constituted by knots which progress

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<sup>11</sup> In order for this crude repositioning to take place, the state needs to dehumanize and render the crossers as bodies that are only distinguishable by their migratory category (i.e. either political or economic).

<sup>12</sup> It is often the case that an asylum-seeker can be arrested at a reception camp and brought to SHTAF without realizing that she has been refused status.

<sup>13</sup> This is captured by the notion of the bogus refugee. For a detailed engagement with the concept see, Kaye (1998), Neumayer (2005), Diop (2014), among others.

towards declaring one worthy of protection. Two of them are under scrutiny here: crossing the border and repositioning from detention to reception.

### *Border crossing*

It was a group of four of us and we hid in the bushes before we crossed [from Turkey to Bulgaria]. We crossed and after some time we were stopped by police. They made us sit on the ground, our hands behind our backs and wait. They took our luggage. Two cars came. We were taken to a police arrest in Svilengrad. We stayed two days before we were taken to Court. We said we were refugees. After that we were placed in buses and told 'Camp Sofia'. We were very happy. We celebrated in the bus. We were going to a refugee camp. After just a few minutes the bus made a turn into a secondary road. We realized we were not being sent to Sofia after the police told us to get off and brought us in a yard behind tall walls with barb wire on top of the walls. We were not happy anymore. We realized we were in prison now. Why? We are just refugees... (interview Hasan, 2013)

Hasan is from Afghanistan and he told me the above in 2013 in Pastrogor. When travelling in a group, the risk of being fooled is reduced. Hasan was part of one such group. He was just transferred from the detention centre in Lyubimets to the reception centre in Pastrogor. I have heard the same story repeatedly for at least a year.

Bulgarian border police came to take us. They told us 'Camp Sofia' but instead brought us [back] to the border. It was two policemen, then six or seven more came... On the Turkish side of the border they started beating us because the boy wanted food. 'No, no, go away, don't come to the Bulgarian side,' they were screaming and beating us. (interview Mikita, 2014)

My conversation with Mikita took place over the phone as at the time of the interview she was in Edirne, Turkey. She explained to me that she and her four children started towards Bulgaria as they wanted to reunite with family members. They walked two days and got lost in the forest. Eventually they were able to reach the town of Voden, Bulgaria, where a local man called the police. Mikita was pushed back to Turkey. Border crossing can be terrifying. The violence at the Bulgarian border, however, cannot be scrutinized without examining its relation to the prescriptions of who is to be allowed in (i.e. the politically persecuted) and who not (the economic migrant). Hasan and Mikita are the victims of this configuration.

Angered by the supposed slackness of Border Police, right-wing formations and civil militias also started patrolling the border in order to chase alleged economic migrants. For a couple of years, National Resistance and the Patriotic Front (the far-right coalition partner in the current government) have been encouraging the protection of the border by civil patrols. There have been a few instances of self-organized groups along the Bulgarian border who go and 'hunt' illegals. Hunting is not only metaphorical in this case. Hunting has become a concrete practice and enlived by

the simultaneous use of the words catching (*zalaviane*) and illegal migrants (*nelegalni migranti*).<sup>14</sup> The persistent use of the phrases has led to the effective reduction of migrants to prey to be caught. One such instance was the civil arrest of fifty border crossers that took place on October 20<sup>th</sup> 2015 by a group of thirteen game hunters who, 'admired the courage of the three border police officers' who had killed an unarmed Afghan just a few days previously.<sup>15</sup> When hunters hunt, they look for economic migrants, 'who [do] not look like refugees'.

Dinko Valev is one such head of a hunter gang who chases economic migrants at the southern border. In 2016, he became an international star as he had significantly improved the hunting practices.<sup>16</sup> He uses dogs, horses, off-road bikes and even military vehicles to trace 'illegals'. Valev is either recognized as a hero, despised, sanctioned by NGOs or even ridiculed as a low-educated man from the countryside. Yet, the propositions on the part of intellectuals with regard to the European borders were not far from Valev's own. Andrey Raichev, a well-known public sociologist and Mihail Konstantinov, a professor of mathematics both called for the army to be able to 'shoot' in cases of mass influx and potential acts of disobedience. The intellectuals were invited to speak about the 'refugee crisis' on the occasion of Donald Tusk's making yet another statement that 'economic migrants shall not come to Europe'.<sup>17</sup> Raichev and Konstantinov became the radicalized versions of Dinko Valev.

Unlike the surgical precision that we witnessed in the organization of the movement of migrants during the so-called 'summer of migration' (2015) in other parts of Europe however, the crossing into and through Bulgaria at the time was completely different. There was a dispersal of the movement of people through the acts of constant escaping: escaping border guards, escaping fingerprinting, escaping refugee camps. As we saw, shootings, push backs, and hunts figure well in one's decision to escape. The above is an escape from the *politics of death*. It is right to recall here, the opening sentence of Mbembe's work 'Necropolitics', 'the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die' (2003: 10). A deep analysis of Mbembe's work is beyond my goal here. Yet, I would like to consider for a moment the possibility that *the plurality of the border* (e.g. dispersal practices, hunters, push backs, but also the possibility to delegate the decision of who is an illegal, and who is not) has something to do with the way enmity is worked through in Mbembe's conceptualization of power

<sup>14</sup> There is an abundance of this combination in Bulgarian media. For example: Boyko Borisov's statement from June 2016, here <http://www.focus-news.net/news/2016/06/01/2248016/premierat-boyko-borisov-dnes-i-poslednite-zaloveni-nelegalni-migranti-na-balgaro-gratskata-granitsa-sa-varnati-vgartsiva.html>. For a detailed media analysis on the 'refugee crisis', see Dodov (2015), in Bulgarian.

<sup>15</sup> Novinite, <http://m.novinite.com/articles/171406/Bulgarian+Hunting+Party+Captures+50+Illegal+Immigrants+Near+Border+with+Turkey> Accessed 08-12-2016.

<sup>16</sup> For more information on Valev, see the following articles: in the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (<http://www.bghelsinki.org/bg/novini/press/single/20160307-signal-dinko-valev/> Accessed: 29-11-2016.); in the Mail Online (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3485501/Bulgarian-gangster-organises-migrant-hunting-patrols-Turkish-border.html> Accessed: 29-11-2016.); BBC (<http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35919068>, Accessed 29-11-2016.)

<sup>17</sup> The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/03/donald-tusk-economic-migrants-do-not-come-to-europe>. Accessed: 08-12-2016.

that 'refers and appeals to exception, emergency, and fictionalized notion of the enemy' (ibid: 16). Hasan and Mikita are such enemies whose pushing back, abuse, and eventual detention are the primary objectives of the border guardians. Marina Gržinić's (2012) reading of Mbembe's is of interest here. The author proposes a reading of Foucault's biopolitics and Mbembe's necropolitics as captured in the differentiation between their main propositions in regards to governmentality. Accordingly, between 'make live and let die' and 'let live and make die'. Mbembe's necropolitics, according to Gržinić's reading, radically transforms the 'make live' into 'let live', where the former is a form of making a 'better life' and the latter a 'pure abandonment'.

The ideological condition, which allows for a distinction between 'true refugees' and 'economic migrants' pluralizes the border and rather captures a 'make disappear and if not, let live' composition. 'Make dead' could be part of 'make disappear' or it could not. The power of 'make disappear' does not necessarily work through rendering one invisible or refusing and masking existence but through turning one into an 'economic migrant' and banalizing the violence against her. In other words, preventing the potential of remaining within a territory (i.e. asylum-seeking) to develop in its actuality (i.e. granting of a status) and hence, to become part of the political.<sup>18</sup> In our case, the 'make disappear' strongly concerns one's appearance as either an 'economic' or a 'political' migrant. What needs to disappear from our side is the potential that one could be a body injured by political persecution; the body has to always appear as if 'economic' and hence, hutable. 'Let live' in the border context is not subsumed under 'pure abandonment' however, but is instead arrested by the monotony of maintaining the minimum of biological reproduction and the leftovers of what Fassin (2012) eloquently called 'humanitarian reason'.

Importantly, we should not set aside the struggles staged by the very subjects of the plurality of the border. They aim to reorganize knowledge that would allow for their consideration of being 'true refugees'. Let's recall Miyazaki's anthropological reading of hope. Namely, as reorganization of knowledge and may I add, the attempted distortion of knowledge boundaries (e.g. the boundary between the political and the economic). After all, 'tricksters challenge the status quo and disrupt perceived boundaries' (Smith, 1997).

As any other peripheral EU border, the Bulgarian one is like a swing. It oscillates between life and death. Guarding the EU, Bulgaria does not offer death only at its entrance but it extends it also at its exit. Those who have made it to the anteriority of the asylum system in Bulgaria, i.e. to a detention centre, have crossed a border illegally. There is no other way around. Embassies never issue visas to people deemed 'undesirable' and the transfers of people that the UNHCR is supposed to perform are a rare occasion. Border crossing is the first step one needs to undertake in order to enter the negotiations over her migrant category. The next step from that negotiation comprises the process by which one is transferred from a detention facility to a reception facility.

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<sup>18</sup> Certainly, we cannot dismiss the contradiction of the border, where securitization and humanitarianism work in concert. Often, rendering one invisible fails precisely because of the humanitarian scandals this nexus sparks.

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### *From detention to reception*

What has brought about the majority of the protests on part of asylum-seekers in Bulgaria is the demand for relocation from detention to reception. This demand stems from narrowing the temporal gap between the potential and the actual mentioned above. I have observed the unfolding of such relocations numerous times between 2011 and 2015. Here, I will stop my attention to a specific transfer that took place between Lyubimets (detention) and Pastrogor (transit/reception).

In 2012, the detention centre in Lyubimets was nearly empty, yet, it was sharply criticized by its inhabitants. Not enough walking time, not enough meals, no medical attention, lack of trusted translators and lawyers, no privacy, beatings, frequent imprisonment in solitary confinement cells are among the most common complaints. What bothers most those who are detained is the knowledge that being held in such facility precludes them from the possibility of being considered for refugee status. There are certain strategies, however, that are employed inside in order for one to reposition herself from detention to reception. The latter is a subversion strategy which attempts to delete the 'economic' appearance of one. To achieve this, there are a couple of stages. First, one tries to accelerate the tempo of seeing a lawyer by individual acts and if that does not work, collective tactics come into play.

As the detention (Lyubimets) and reception (Pastrogor) facilities are separated by only 13 km, the observation of such repositioning is easy. The purpose of Pastrogor is to serve as a transit station, where Dublin decisions and fast procedures take place<sup>19</sup>. In the summer of 2012, when conducting research in the village of Pastrogor, the number of people who were crossing the border with Turkey was increasing already. One night in mid August that same year, I was having dinner with about 15 people. The crowd comprised activists from Sofia and people who were accommodated at the time at the transit centre. A phone rang at some point which interrupted the monotony of it all. 'They have declared a hunger strike', said Alaa, a Syrian in his late 30s. 'They' were 21 Syrians and four Iraqis, four minors among them, who found themselves in Lyubimets, the detention facility nearby.

Five of us - three Syrian men, a Somali and I - went to the detention centre the very next day. A taxi driver left us at a desolated parking lot that was easily seen from the prison's cells. A valley of thorns and a tall concrete wall separated the lot from the prison. Yet, the long distance between the two, paradoxically, eased the communication between those on the inside and those on the outside. Indeed, a closer proximity would have hindered the otherwise visible lot (because of the tall

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<sup>19</sup> The Dublin decision consists of taking one's fingerprints in order to identify the first European country of entry. If indeed it turns out that this country is Bulgaria, then a Dublin decision is taken that the foreigner's asylum status will be considered by the Bulgarian state. From there, the asylum procedure goes into its second stage or to the so-called *uskoreno proizvodstvo* (accelerated production [of status]). During the fast procedure, an interviewer of SAR assesses the validity of the reasons behind one's departure from their home country. If enough evidence is presented at the SAR interviewers that one fits the description of a 'politically persecuted person', then she is granted the status. If not, as indeed in the majority of the cases, she is considered to have escaped a place for illegitimate reasons and hence, in pursuit of economic gains. From the above the reader could already sense the importance of finding oneself in a transit camp; it is the first stage towards the possibility that one is proclaimed a real refugee.

walls) on the one hand and would have too easily attracted the attention of the prison guards on the other. The parking was often used as a communication stand. One-on-one communication was only possible, however, because cell phones were allowed inside the detention camp.

Standing in the parking lot, Alaa called somebody inside. In just a few seconds we saw a person climb the window grid of the third floor and wave a white t-shirt. As we looked closer, we could see around 40 more people, all waving their white t-shirts. On one of them, with a black, thick sharpie 'Freedom' was written. We waved back. The conversation was conducted over the phone and it became clear that the only demand the prisoners held was that '[they] want out of Lyubimets!' The hunger strike was declared in order for the group to be transferred to Pastrogor, where they could go on with the asylum procedure. The painfully known phrase of 'we are all refugees' was uttered again and again. The people inside were tired of waiting. In fact *waiting* was always uttered in its Bulgarian imperative form *chakai!* [wait]. The word had become inseparable of one's dictionary even when not much contact with the outside world existed.

Hunger striking is not the only strategy used by detainees. Self-injuries of all sorts, rioting, refusal of going outside, and breaking property all take place as a demand for repositioning at a reception centre. Kawe, a Kurd in his late 20s was showing off his self-made arm wounds that he slowly carved into his flesh breaking a window in order to provide himself with a sharp edge. He was punished. A doctor carefully washed his wounds and then the prison guards threw him in the confinement cell. Kawe wanted out of Lyubimets. He escaped Bulgaria not too long after he was transferred to the transit camp in Pastrogor when he realized that even harsher punishment awaits him for breaking the property of the centre. Namely, refusal of refugee status. Such punishment is in fact possible. The arbitrariness of the political/economic binary sustains that same arbitrariness in the asylum-system as well. Articles 17 and 18 from the self-made rules in a reception centre in the country read:

(17) You have to be patient in receiving status. The impatient ones may not receive status if they break relations with the administration;

(18) Those who do not wear badges... will receive status at a later point (interview volunteer 2014)<sup>20</sup>

This was not the first or the last such hunger strike and Kawe was not the last one to impose self-harm. These are the most widely spread forms of protest in Bulgarian (and not only) detention facilities for foreigners despite the risks such tactics breath as the general invisibility of the inside often precludes one of the most important sides in hunger striking, and namely the audience. Hunger, in our case, accelerates one's chances to end up in the transit centre in Pastrogor and thus, to be repositioned as a *potential* refugee. The physical repositioning from detention to reception brings possibilities for a suspension of one's appearance as an economic migrant.

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<sup>20</sup> This information was given by a volunteer in one of the reception camps in the country. The name of the volunteer and the camp are withheld purposefully. The information was collected as part of the writing process for 'Trapped in Europe's Quagmire'.

### *Migration studies and the political/economic distinction*

Building crude lines between who is an economic and who a political migrant continues to interest social scientists long after its formal separation in the 1950s. There are studies that do play with the difference and speak to its discursive and practical implementations. Adelson (2004) for example takes the UK's asylum system and speaks of the subjective sides in the determination of one's status according to this particular taxonomy. The author concludes that by 'crafting the difference', the UK government displays hesitation in upholding responsibility for political and economic developments abroad. The legal separation has also proliferated in the formation of somewhat peculiar sociological questions and methodological approaches. Kalena Cortes (2004) obediently applies the taxonomy in the US context in order to explore the different market outcomes according to one's status as either a refugee or an economic migrant. Stepping on a human capital investment research schemes she tells us that refugees make greater market gains as compared to economic migrants. Estimating the determinants for annual Jewish migration between 1881-1914 by applying economic variables, exploring chain migrations and indicators of religious violence, Boustan (2007) asks 'Were Jews Political Refugees or Economic Migrants?' Such a theoretical question, however, is methodologically dubious as the distinction did not exist at that time.

There is almost a scholarly consensus on the necessity to separate so-called *labour migration* from *forced migration*. This necessity is an effect of the ways in which the particularities of migration have to be studied (see for example Diner, 2008). Migration studies tend to preoccupy themselves with the *determinants* and *consequences* of people's moving. This necessity comes about partially because of the uneasy relation between migration in general and migrations in particular. In Demuth's account (2000), 'the refugee is an involuntary migrant, a victim of politics, war, or national catastrophe... In short, every refugee is a migrant, but not every migrant is a refugee' (27). Demuth leads the reader to the proposition that such categories are legitimate and shall be used as a ground for methodological approaches in the field:

Categories therefore have their worth as an analytical tool. As opposed to some academic, judicial, or administrative delineations of such categories, it must be clear that in real life there are mixtures of migration types... Also, academic categorization does not *per se* have other objectives than clearing a path through a jungle of difficult academic terrain: explain the complicated (ibid: 27).

Following such paths gives an epistemic primacy to legal categories and provides them with a science-like form and precludes the conflictual nature of such taxonomies I explored above. Migration studies tend to reproduce the boundary between what is 'economic' and what is 'political', which is implicit in what is termed to be 'voluntary' and 'forced'.

Yet, what I demonstrated in this paper is that the economic/political migrant binary is an effect of the way the 'economic' sphere is separated by the 'political'

sphere. European asylum systems use the typology of 'economic' migrants and 'genuine' refugees to reproduce such abstractions. The very notion of the 'economic' migrant and the refusal to offer her protection erases coercion as a possible characteristic of the market, or the sphere that 'economic migrants' supposedly escape. This point is important in identifying the distinctive character of the forms that govern migration today in order to grasp their inner logics and not treat them as separate from larger ideological presuppositions and historical forms. Furthermore, I demonstrated that such separation is a relation of domination. In other words, the political/economic migrant binary is not simply an abstract structure. Asylum systems throughout Europe have enclosed their own coercion stemming from the binary itself into pockets of alienation and exclusion: border arrests, detention camps, registration camps, where the prime function of the European guardians is to isolate the 'economic' from the 'political'; the 'bogus' from the 'real'. This confronts people in a very real way and they resort to hunger strikes and self-harm so as to eradicate such boundaries. This is a terrain of struggle, where those who are subjected to such differentiation act in relation to it. The desired repositioning between detention and reception centres in Bulgaria is an instance of this struggle.

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