ERIM

Emptiness

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It is not unlikely that the word emptiness might come to mind in relation to Bosnia and Herzegovina. While just an intuition, an immediate first impression, emptiness has nevertheless been applied as a fertile coordinate to portray the hardships and contradictions of post-war Bosnia (Kurtović 2020; Henig 2020; Hromadžić 2015). Emptiness, following this intuition, is evidently not empty: it is not a pure void, but the result of specific historical conditions; a motile and layered emptiness. Lingering somewhere between the concrete and the abstract, emptiness retains a rich conceptual and analytical ambiguity; it is potentially a coordinate for critical research, a figure. Whether to refer to the consistent state of abandonment and ruination of the built environment across the country, or to its seemingly "pristine" and "wild" natural features—arguably some of the few that remain in Continental Europe—emptiness seems to aptly capture Bosnia's post-socialist, transitional landscape.

Plješevica, September 2023. Photo: Richard Lee Peragine

For Larisa Kurtović who writes about post war Bosnia and Herzegovina, emptiness "mark[s] a difference from the way things were and will be, from the way things are and we imagine they ought to be" (2020: 6). Emptiness, ruins and rubble, exposing such a gap, distance or difference, are bearers of negativity and a stirring potentiality.

Indeed, the figure of emptiness prefigures a space of absence, loss or lack-of; but, we should add, it also indicates the untapped bounties of nature—as the name for an independent entity rejected and denied today by capitalism's dominant anaturalism; an empty nature which can be destroyed and remade at will (Neyrat 2019). Resorting to the term emptiness to describe space thus is far from neutral. Since the incipient stages of Western capitalist modernity, the conflation between emptiness and space has been a condition for putatively-free spatial appropriations, enclosures and thus manifold forms of extraction, thereby relegating nature and nonhuman forms of existence to a subordinate ontological position. This empty and appropriable presence moreover legitimises violence enacted against the many racialised figures assigned to the non-white Other that inhabits such a supposedly blank, uninhabited space (Henni 2020). The figure of emptiness therefore recalls other geographical tropes such as deserts, swamps, forests, or islands, which have been turned into images or narratives by specific regimes with the goal enabling violent spatial politics, all the while shaping and often limiting how we approach the world. In this sense, emptiness is trans-scalar and trans-historical, although eminently situated; its character proper to both built and natural environments.

Dom Penzionera, Bihać, September, 2023. Photo: Richard Lee Peragine

Whether empty factories, warehouses and unfinished public buildings, houses in ruins and vacant *vikendice*, or tumbledown infrastructure, such an architectural emptiness provides concrete evidence of the thirty-odd years of structural abandonment and organized inaction that have contributed, in the post-socialist transition, to the government of populations within and outside the order of the State. In doing so, the Transition—as an ideological-teleological narrative of redemption through the integration within the liberal-democratic, Eurowestern world—has left in place structures of domination and regulation for mostly exogenous or crony accumulation (Horvat and Štiks 2015). This architectural emptiness is therefore not incidental nor unproductive, but part and parcel of the logic of capital that promotes the Transition's extractive environment. It is, in fact, left for the most part unaddressed: a structural planning inconsistency, handed down by the post-war convoluted form of government, which emerges, for instance, in inter-entity lack of cooperation, inter-cantonal gaps and overlaps in planning tools, or pre-war stalled privatisation processes and property disputes, whose very legislative framework actually hinders most resolutions. Forms of abandonment and ruination in the built environment of the Transition moreover play an active role in determining and organizing the type of operations put in place by migration management. In the context of the so-called **Balkan route**, in fact, spatial forms of emptiness have been both pursued by migrant people headed for Fortress Europe, as a space for refuge and shelter, as well as negated, as a consequence, by coalitions of national and supra-national authorities through of evictions, policing, **fences**, walls and wires.

In general, natural features such as choppy seas, rushing rivers, primary forests and karstic mountains, or even the scarce presence of human settlements and infrastructure due to these geo-physical features, have been co-opted and weaponised against **illegal(ised)** migration (Hameršak and Pleše 2021). Cutting down forests, strategizing on the presence of **explosive remnants of war** or strong riverine currents have in fact shaped hostile, deadly border environments (Badano, Percival and Schuppli 2023; Walters, Heller and Pezzani 2022). Operated through the appropriation of the supposedly empty space of Nature, these forms of weaponization in themselves concur to border violence. Weaponization operationalises nonhuman environments against bare life, by casting migrant and refugee people into specific environments of exception. Emptiness—as the name for spatial forms of abandonment and ruination—has coincided with the space of the sovereign ban and, in this sense, points toward a more-than-human biopolitics (Smith 2011) or specific form of geontopower (Povinelli 2016). The

environment is thus not simply a backdrop of bordering practices but is itself operationalised by way of the weaponization of its geo-physical features; co-opted in order to deter, thwart and animalize illegal(ised) migration (Vaughan-Williams 2015; Sakr 2018); causing the debilitation (Puar 2017) and **death** of migrant people, while entrenching Bosnia's extractive environment.

Therefore, the management of the Transition in Bosnia intersects with the tactics of migration management, highlighting "the accountability of 'broader 'geopolitical games' played by the EU and the different governments involved in the region on [migrants'] own lives and bodies" (Minca and Collins 2021: 10). Emptiness, in this sense, also brings to the fore a geopolitical logic and strategy. Within this discourse, Bosnia and the **Western Balkans** constitute part of a "geo-racial frontier" (Rexhepi 2023) between a White Christian Europe and its Others: "a strategic spatial sedimentation of racial difference" (Rexhepi 2023: 9); the creation of an empty buffer space in and through which the Eurowestern world now extends its past imperial and colonial frontiers into the biopolitical management of non-white populations.

Like other areas in the geographies of capitalism, such a frontier logic, which is currently imposed, above all, through the externalisation of EU borders, also functions toward the definition of repositories of raw materials, reserves of unskilled or highly-educated cheap labour, dumping sites for extra-territorial detention or for toxicity through waste trafficking and lax environmental standards. Emptiness contextualises the Balkan route within the longer project of EU-integration of the Western Balkans. In fact, EU-accession plans and instruments, for instance the IPA, entice Bosnia and the rest of the Western Balkan Six into committing to state reform, while setting institutional requirements, standards and conditions which entrench the asymmetries of this very frontier logic; above all, those emerging from the current border regime. Since the end of the war, border security in fact has comprised one of the key ambits of reform and supervised implementation in Bosnia's EU-accession process (Jansen 2023). Concomitantly, this geopolitics regarding the extraterritorial externalisation of the EUropean border regime, or other highlighted aspects intrinsic to the geo-racial frontier, provides opportunities for the ethno-nationalist agendas of regional governments to reach internal economic and political interests (Hameršak et al. 2020). The Transition thus incorporates and entrenches Bosnia, and the Western Balkans, into a semi-peripheral condition: preserving the power of former socialist élites; acting as a laboratory for Euro-Atlantic governance; eternally postponing a confrontation with the consequences of the Transition itself, while reaping the profit for capitalist cores and transnational financial debt institutions. Through this frontier logic—and the parallel definition of an extra-territorial empty space—the Balkans are projected as a "badland" or "powder keg", in light of a supposedly wild spatial character and violent anthropological essence: an empty space of non-white Others.

As a central tenet of migration management along the Balkan route, the weaponization of emptiness, either of built or natural environments, in other words, falls under the rubric of this geopolitical project of governance. It renders evident a co-implication between migration management and the management of the Transition, thus exposing the concrete entanglements in space between coloniality and the EU-integration process, deindustrialisation and privatisation processes, past and current forced (e)migration. The management of the Transition, we might suggest, has been erected upon the management of emptiness, bringing to the fore "an unfamiliar logic of governance" (Dzenovska 2020: 14) of contemporary capitalism that sheds light on the intersections between the weaponized use of space and more-than-human biopolitical governance; between the current border regime and contemporary extractive capitalism.

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