



In Defense of Economic Migrants

Aleks Error

September 15, 2015

After being described in terminology usually reserved for Biblical plagues by British Prime Minister David Cameron, and having endured calls for their extermination whilst drowning in the Mediterranean by *Sun* columnist Katie Hopkins, the refugees who managed to survive the asylum gauntlet that runs from the battlefields of the Middle East to the borders of the Schengen zone have finally earned themselves some sympathy. Well done chaps, you deserve it. Economic migrants, though? They're a whole 'nother story. Fuck those guys.

An unintended consequence of this outpouring of basic human empathy is that, in their attempts to catch up with popular sentiment, cynical conservative backpedaling has drawn a very clear line in the sand: refugees? Kinda OK. Economic migrants? Bad. Having been an "economic migrant" myself once upon a time, I resent my ilk being transformed into shadowy, job-stealing bogeymen opportunistically exploiting global conflict for our own gain.

If you were to subscribe to right-wing rhetoric, you'd think that economic migrants read news reports on Syrian atrocities like they're LinkedIn references—looking for new opportunities to move. There are certainly people surfing this migratory wave that aren't fleeing war and probable death, but their situation isn't the equivalent of moving to Dubai for a tax-free pay rise, or relocating to Berlin because of London's absurd rent prices, nor is it equatable with marrying your gay Dutch friend so you can stay in the UK, like this moneyed Ukrainian girl I know.

Walking the first steps on the road that leads you towards scurrying across the Hungarian border while fascist camerawomen trip up your children isn't something driven by lifestyle, it's fueled by hopelessness. Calling them economic "migrants" diminishes their struggle. What they really are—like my family and I once were—is economic refugees.

I was born in Belgrade just a couple of years before the Yugoslav experiment turned genocidal. Although we never witnessed the horrors that our neighbors in Sarajevo and Vukovar did, we still experienced all the everyday knock-on effects that come with living in a war zone: things like hyperinflation, sanctions, petrol rationing, and food shortages.

Growing up, I was told stories of how, on payday, people had to decide between sprinting to the shop to spend all their earnings on basic necessities, or legging it to the nearest black market to exchange them for Deutsche Marks. Because the value of the dinar was dropping in real time, you had to figure out which was more cost effective—mere meters and minutes factored into your thought process. The military reality of war didn't reach Serbia until the NATO bombing campaign of 1999, but civil society crumbled while kleptocracy and organized crime filled its void before that.

Under western sanctions, the black market economy thrived: People would drive over the border to Hungary, stock up on petrol and cigarettes, then drive back to hustle them off at marked up prices. Belgrade's murder rate **doubled** within a single year. Key figures in the Milosevic regime were **suspected** of peddling heroin. Crooked politicians and mobsters never had it so good. To maintain a sense of normality during NATO bombing raids, nightclubs would open in the day then shut at dusk, giving people time to make it home before the next wailing of the bomb sirens.

Our lives, admittedly, weren't at risk, nor were we forced from our homes, which disqualified us and many other ethnic Serbs within Serbia's borders from refugee status. Most people don't realize how narrow the criteria are: To qualify for asylum, you usually have to be at direct risk of persecution or death. My family didn't put in a bogus asylum application, nor did we attempt storm the Calais tunnel; we were granted a visa based on my parents' professional qualifications. We weren't in danger of being maimed physically, but our prospects in life were.

Serbia currently sits eighth in the Cato Institute's "**world misery index**". With youth unemployment perpetually fixed at around 50 percent and an average monthly salary that **reportedly** clocks in at \$443 (average, that is, plenty earn less). I'll happily concede that the hardship of staying would have been utterly banal compared to what the populations of Aleppo or Kabul or Srebrenica have suffered, but I won't quietly accept being demonized by some posh Tory twat whose biggest personal hardship is his **resemblance to a condom**.

It's interesting how contradictory the British Conservative stance on economic migrants is to their purported ideals. For a party that worships at the altar of Thatcherism, that preaches the gospel of deregulation and deifies the free market, their stance on migration contradicts their core neoliberal principles. It appears that a borderless, globalized world is great when it allows corporations to exploit cheap labor in developing nations, but when those principles are applied in the opposite direction they're countered with bureaucratic razor wire and land mines.

But the Conservatives aren't the only offenders: A member of Germany's Christian Democratic-led caucus, who happen to be led by a certain Angela Merkel, the current It Girl for beleaguered peoples everywhere, **recently declared** "economic distress is no grounds for asylum. We don't want migration into the social welfare system." Yeah, because people who've trekked across an entire continent(s) come across as really fucking work-shy. I'm sure all they really want to do is sit around scratching their arse whilst watching German daytime TV at the taxpayers' expense.

This current hysteria surrounding economic migrants makes a mockery of the humanist principles that European nations are usually so keen to espouse. What it essentially says is that ambition and self-advancement are a privilege reserved for a Schengen zone elite, while the rest

of the world should be content with simply being alive. Rather than being the spiritual home of progressive, liberal ideals that it's usually depicted as, Europe is a continent with a caste system, one built upon nationality and enforced by visas.