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Alter-globalisation, not Anti-globalisation for Europe: Learning from the Anthropology of No-border Activism

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Think Piece: Alter-globalisation, not Anti-globalisation for Europe: Learning from the Anthropology of No-border Activism

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Abstract:
Anti-globalisation authoritarians and alter-globalisation activists criticise Europe's liberal political order but offer opposing views. Ethnographic research with no-border activists during the 'refugee crisis' of 2015 reveals how egalitarian assemblies and open borders can counter nationalist exclusion.

Key words: No-Border Activism; Alter-Globalization Movements; European Long Summer of Migration 2015; Political Atmospheres; Egalitarianism

> *We reject the ideology of globalism, and we embrace the doctrine of patriotism. — Donald Trump at the UN General Assembly in 2018 (United Nations 2018)*

> *The liberal idea presupposes that nothing needs to be done. The migrants can kill, plunder and rape with impunity because their rights as migrants must be protected. — Vladimir Putin in an interview with the* Financial Times *(Barber, Foy and Barker 2019)*

> *Migration is a necessary condition for building an inclusive society [...] Thank you [asylum seekers] for opening Europe! — Andrej, Slovenian activist*

The words of the Russian and American presidents could not sound more politically different than those of the Slovenian no-border activist. But what do they have in common? If anything, all three are critical of the existing liberal political order and see it as one of the reasons for the crisis of the European Union (EU). However, their criticisms are directed at completely opposite ends of the political spectrum: far-right authoritarians such as Trump and Putin see migration, labour, and minority rights (such as religious or LGBTQ+ rights), green policies, and global cooperation as values that the EU embodies in excess. Activists like Andrej accuse the EU of lacking these values or, at worst, of promoting them mainly in order to pursue its own political, economic, and cultural dominance.

At the moment, the wind of nationalism and authoritarianism seems to be blowing stronger in the EU. This can be felt in the dominant political atmosphere, that is the general affective political mood that people share in situations involving a certain distribution of bodies in space (Schnegg and Bens forthcoming). Whilst there is a lingering sense of tension that the war in Ukraine could spread beyond its borders in the face of continued Russian aggression (Von der Leyen 2025), a topic beyond the scope of this text, there is also a fear of uncontrolled migration from the Global South as a potential threat to the stability of the EU, at worst as a gateway for Islamist terrorism.

Indeed, policies on migration and borders that were once marginal are now being championed by EU institutions and national leaders. For example, the EU Commission is currently proposing to detain rejected asylum seekers in so-called 'return hubs' outside the EU (a policy that is part of the Migration and Asylum Pact from 2023) (Ismail, Vermeylen, and Payne 2025), whilst the leader of the German Christian Democrats, Friedrich Merz, recently called for a de facto ban on all undocumented migrants entering Germany, including those entitled to protection (Klug 2025). During his speech at a traditional folk festival almost two years ago, Merz, who has recently become Germany's new chancellor after the federal election in February 2025, claimed that the Berlin district of Kreuzberg was 'not Germany' (Schmitt-Roschmann 2023). Picking on Kreuzberg — the neighbourhood, by the way, in which I live myself — is an apparent reference to its multicultural and queer-friendly atmosphere and the fact that it has historically been a hub for left-wing activism.

Do these reactionary responses that call for protecting the EU's body politic have anything to do with the decline of progressive social movements in recent decades? Were the social movements that helped asylum seekers during the so-called European refugee crisis in 2015 not also one of the reasons why the EU took a humanitarian stance towards the asylum seekers, at least temporarily (Podgornik Jakil 2024)? In this piece, I examine what lessons no-border activists — shaped by the legacy of the alter-globalisation movements — offer for resisting the increasingly authoritarian political atmosphere of today.

The long summer of migration of 2015

As an activist anthropologist, I have been studying social movements organised around the issue of migration in Slovenia and Germany for over a decade. The year 2015, referred to by some critical migration scholars as the Long Summer of Migration (Kasparek and Speer 2015), was a time when the number of asylum seekers arriving in Europe was the highest since the end of the Second World War. They were fleeing armed conflict, increasing poverty, and the negative effects of climate change in the neighbouring continents of Asia and Africa. Many drowned whilst trying to cross the sea from Turkey

to Greece, the latter of which is one of the few remaining entry points for non-European asylum seekers, or were found dead on their journey through Europe (Bell and Thorpe 2016).

In the face of these tragedies, tens of thousands of European citizens took action outside the traditional frameworks of major humanitarian organisations like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Committee of the Red Cross. They mobilised spontaneously, donating clothes, helping new arrivals on the shores of Greek islands, and welcoming them at train stations across the continent. Their presence and actions created a highly visible welcoming atmosphere, amplified by widespread coverage in both mass media and social media. The affective intensity of this atmosphere helped to push the EU authorities to temporarily set up a humanitarian transportation system across Europe to bring asylum seekers to safety. If, as Schnegg and Bens (forthcoming) argue, atmospheres have the power to move people beyond their control, then the one these citizens created undoubtedly exerted real pressure on policymakers.

No-border activists as alter-globalisation movements

Amongst the volunteers were no-border activist groups rooted in left-libertarian and alter-globalisation movements, drawing inspiration from Western autonomous and anarchist groups and indigenous struggles like the Zapatistas in Mexico. They had a much more radical vision than just helping asylum seekers. At border crossings and, more significantly, in social centres — spaces they established by squatting in abandoned buildings and managing them outside the reach of the state and private companies — they organised assemblies with the asylum seekers. These gatherings aimed to create an atmosphere of radical equality through a certain arrangement of bodies in space: participants, regardless of their background, sat in a circle and made decisions together to plan direct actions and learn together what kind of world they want to live in.

At the assemblies, activists and asylum seekers planned protests, which they carried out at national borders across Europe to put pressure on state authorities to allow asylum seekers to pass. They held pickets in front of refugee camps to demand more humane living conditions and the right to stay for all. Yet the transformative work took also place elsewhere: in the countless events they organised together, such as communal cooking sessions, decolonial reading groups, and skill-sharing workshops. These assemblies and activities had a prefigurative function: they were acts of world-making, spaces where different bodies came together to imagine and begin constructing an alternative, more just world.

What distinguished the no-border activists, who were also my comrades, from today's authoritarian anti-globalisation politicians was that they

continued the rich tradition of alter-globalisation movements fighting for an alternative sociopolitical and economic world order, especially since the Zapatista uprising in 1994. These movements have always made assemblies the core of their decision-making practices (Della Porta 2014). But whilst the main target of these movements was neoliberal doctrine, today we face something much more dangerous.

New futures require open borders

So, what can we learn from the no-border activists when current authoritarian movements and leaders see globalisation as a threat and call for a return to nation states and exclusionary values?

Many of my comrades in Germany and Slovenia shared the sentiment that the mass self-organised solidarity of European citizens in 2015 prompted the EU authorities to take in asylum seekers. However, they felt that humanitarianism, the more or less apolitical work of helping people in need of assistance, was not enough; it is a temporary, patronising effort and selective of those who 'deserve' protection (Ticktin 2014). The EU's border and migration regime has become much stricter since then, as the wave of volunteering died down after a few months.

The struggles inspired by the alter-globalisation movements have shown that one must be radically open to collaboration with the oppressed. Change can only be achieved by prefiguring the future together through decision-making practices and sociopolitical relations (Graeber 2009) that cultivate radically egalitarian atmospheres and empower others to build an alternative world.

Whilst the EU authorities panic about the imminent collapse of the European Union if external and internal security are not strengthened, no-border activists see the movements of asylum seekers as a potential for the abolition of borders and the transformation of Europe into a truly democratic and inclusive space. They seek a 'world of many worlds', as the Zapatistas put it: a world that brings together people with different ways of knowing and being, and in which dominant identities (religious, gender, citizen/non-citizen, and others) are constantly problematised in favour of living and flourishing together (Cadena and Blaser 2018).

Although no-border activists may not have succeeded in creating a sufficiently resonant political atmosphere for radical political change in 2015, the knowledge and experience they have accumulated through their struggles is more relevant today than ever. They show that alter-globalisation movements live on and re-emerge in times of crisis, offering egalitarian global alternatives. My comrades have taught me a valuable lesson: the EU will not fall apart because people reach its borders in search of a safer and better life but because the EU is not ready to become truly democratic. They were right.

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