What COVID-19 Reveals about Borders and Citizenship: Europe’s Migrants on Their Way Back Home (#WitnessingCorona)

Datum : 18. Mai 2020

Travel restrictions became a global response to combat the spread of COVID-19. According to an analysis from April 2020 at least 93 percent of the global population live in countries with coronavirus-related travel restrictions. Nearly half of that proportion – some 3 billion people in all – are in countries that are almost completely closed to travel. Severe travel restrictions have promoted a disparity between "foreign residents" and "citizens" and constrained the movement of migrants, refugees, and other "noncitizens," leaving them stranded away from their homes. Against this background, in this contribution I offer some reflections on borders, homes, and citizenship by exploring the experiences of some of Europe's noncitizens and their struggle to return home.

Germany, travel restrictions, and the "Rückholaktion" (return campaign)

On 17 March, the Robert Koch Institute[1] changed the COVID-19 threat risk for Germany from "moderate" to "high" and warned the public that the pandemic (and its effects) could last for up to two years. Following this report, the German Government implemented a series of emergency responses to minimize the public's exposure to the virus. The general call for social isolation was quickly followed by travel restrictions that limit and regulate entries to Germany from the Schengen area.

Following the travel restrictions, Foreign Minister Heiko Maas announced *a Rückholaktion (return campaign),* a 50 million Euro EU program to bring German (citizen) travelers who are stranded abroad back home. Chartered planes were arranged to carry German travelers from fifty designated locations which were deemed at risk or had already enforced travel restrictions to Germany. The *return program* targeted locations including Morocco, Argentina, the Philippines, Peru, India, and China. With the organizational help of German Embassies and other diplomatic missions, an estimated 225,000 German citizens stranded abroad were to be brought home.

At a time of radical uncertainty, the *return program* quickly raised questions, especially for Germany's foreign residents who were also stranded abroad during the international shut-down. Who is included in the definition of German travelers? Can foreign residents of Germany who are stranded abroad use the chartered planes? Who has the right to return to Germany?

After weeks of following the news and talking to Germany's foreign residents, I argue that Germany's return program has promoted a hierarchical relationship between citizens and noncitizens and deprioritized foreign residents who call Germany their home. The case of Germany stands as a striking example of a global tendency toward promoting a rising disparity between citizens and noncitizens.

Germany's foreign residents negotiating their way back home

Image 1: Conversation with Yener. Copyright: Tunay Altay. April 2020.

#BringSaileshHome started as an online campaign to enlist Sailesh, a foreign resident of Germany, to the *return program's* list in India. Sailesh was part of an art residency in India when the travel restrictions were put in force. Away from their[2] home in Berlin, Sailesh contacted the German Embassy in India to ask for help and was informed that chartered planes were prioritizing German citizens, and Germany's foreign residents were allowed only in the case of vacancies. Left with the option of remaining in India for the foreseeable future during a global pandemic, Sailesh started a twitter campaign to reach the Embassy officials:

> "Since I am only a resident I am just another number to them, and a flight leaves tomorrow that I want to get on. Since I am in a remote region, it may be close to six months before the border restrictions are lifted and I am able to fly back."

Yener, a 36-year-old Turkish citizen who has been living in Germany for the past ten years, was caught in a similar situation during his journey in Peru. On his Facebook page, Yener describes his experience as follows:

> "Peru closed all its borders, and I couldn't fly back home [Berlin]. While I was trying to find a solution, the EU closed its borders as well, and I felt hopeless because I was so sure that I will end up staying in Peru for months."

Learning about the return campaign, Yener and his partner contacted German Embassy to register their names on the list, only to find out that Yener was not able to register for the first public list as the list was only open to German citizens.

> "Peru was very strict about international flights. As they see Europe and Europeans as the source of this pandemic, the local administration was hesitant to allow a plane to take the tourists. As I was waiting to hear back from the Embassy, I was almost sure that I wouldn't be able to get a ticket on time,"

said Yener as he struggled with the idea of remaining in Peru indefinitely.

Finally, Yener's German partner succeeded to register Yener as his companion, and Yener sent an additional request of registration to the German Embassy with a different form. After a stressful day of waiting, both Yener and his partner managed to obtain a seat and made their way to the German Embassy in Lima from where they were escorted to the chartered plane to fly back home. Still unsure whether it was his German companion's registration or his own request that qualified him for a seat in the return program, Yener felt haunted with the idea of remaining elsewhere, away from home.

Unlike Yener, Ay?e, a 43-year-old Turkish citizen who has been living in Germany for the past three years, was not lucky enough to obtain a seat in the return program. Ay?e heard the news

about the travel restrictions during one of her regular business trips to Turkey. Ever since, she has been stranded in a country that she no longer calls home.

Spending the period of social isolation as a guest in her friends' and family's apartments, Ay?e realized that relying on people's hospitality in such a sensitive time was far from the advised measures for social isolation. In addition to her anxieties concerning the pandemic itself, Ay?e has to cope with the stress of being away from her partner and, more than that, she has been missing deadlines for the time-sensitive applications that the German immigration authorities require.

"My residence permit in Germany has to be renewed by 11 May. I normally have an appointment with Germany's Foreign Office, yet there is no way to be back in Berlin on time" says Ay?e. In calculating her future prospect to be back in Germany, she notes:

> "I had to move away from Istanbul to find a safer place to stay. Now, Turkey issued a national ban to even cross city borders. Even in the case that I manage to obtain a seat in a flight to Germany, I won't be able to travel back to Istanbul to take it."

The story of Azra: A Turkish citizen's challenge with travel restrictions

Image 2: Conversation with Azra. Copyright: Tunay Altay. April 2020.

As a response to the international travel restrictions, many European countries, at least the ones with sufficient financial resources, put in force return campaigns similar to Germany's return program and organized chartered planes for their citizens stranded abroad. On the other hand, countries with limited resources, or lack of interest in offering such services to their citizens, did not provide this option. The Turkish Foreign Ministry's announcement for concerned Turkish citizens abroad thus simply consisted of advice to stay calm and avoid crowded places. Compared to the measures taken by Germany and France, Turkish citizens who were stranded had no choice but to struggle to return home by themselves.

Azra, a Turkish artist who was stranded in France, was caught in a situation that she describes as a *horror tunnel*. "I flew to Paris from Istanbul on 11 March to submit an official document, and I was planning to be back in Istanbul on Sunday, 13 March. Turkey had only one corona case announced by then, and I was not expecting things to move so quickly," Azra explained about her decision to take the journey.

"I got a call from a friend and learned that Turkey was enforcing a travel restriction to France and dropped everything to head back to the airport." While waiting in line at the Turkish Airlines desk, Azra overheard a family of three paying 13,000 Turkish Lira (2,000 €) per person for presumably the last flight to Turkey from Paris. After talking with the Turkish Airlines officials and realizing that she had no other choice but to also pay 13,000, TL she describes her feelings as follows: "This was an absurd moment. Even if I could afford to be on that plane, there were no guarantees that it wouldn't be canceled."

At this point, Azra and another passenger decided to fly to Athens, which was the second closest and a significantly cheaper option to fly to Turkey: "I was ready to take a ferry, train, or even cross the border on foot." After arriving in Athens, Azra was lucky enough to obtain a seat in one of the last flights back to Turkey. Yet, her experience in the *horror tunnel* left her mistrustful towards the government.

Who can afford to return home? Exposing the border logic of the emergency responses

The emergency responses following the COVID-19 have highlighted and increased existing discrepancies between citizens and foreign residents and exposed the hierarchies which prioritized some over others. The experiences of migrants during the pandemic have proved that borders are contextual and even those who have managed to hold residence status in Europe might be excluded from certain benefits in the wake of a global crisis.

The hierarchical distinction between citizens and foreign residents is an indicator of a border logic that has to be examined carefully. In the case of travel restrictions, Germany (and other

states) used their authority to determine who may circulate on their territory and who may cross their borders (Hönig 2020). Therefore, the border logic of COVID-19 perpetuates a simple equation: In order to protect the "public," Germany must restrict any means of travel. The return program – by opening its doors to some who reside in Germany but are temporarily abroad, and keeping the doors closed to others – stands as an exception of this logic and demonstrates a degree of ambivalence regarding the German government's responsibility to protect its stranded people. By deciding on who can or cannot travel back to Germany, the emergency response exposes who is worthy of the protection of the German government.

This situation had put foreign residents into a position in which they had to negotiate their presence "at home." This is particularly worrying as only the stories of those who had access to an online community or who had a supporting citizen-partner were told. Yet, the conditions of those with no support from online communities are left unheard.

Germany has 10 million registered foreign residents, which amount to 13.1 percent of its total population (Federal Statistical Office 2018). Adding the number of undocumented migrants to this number, more than 11 million "foreign" people are possibly calling Germany their home. When rights are operationalized in a social context, the separation of citizens and foreign residents may appear as a common sense in global jurisprudence. However, the high number of noncitizens in Germany suggests that millions of lives are condemned to uncertainty, and in the worst case precarity, when the government enforces and promotes disparity between citizens and foreign residents.

Of course, I do not wish to represent the return program as the sole component of Germany's approach to COVID-19. The return program is one of the many regulatory activities carried out by the state. Among these, some were inclusive of foreign residents, while others were not. Yet, the uncertainty that foreign residents have experienced during this crisis proved that being "at home" has to be negotiated, and their effort to achieve rights and protection may not result in the linear progression which eventually leads to naturalization.

Citizens, noncitizens, and the question of how to leave no one behind

The rising disparity between citizens and noncitizens can be seen globally in different emergency policies. As an example, the US implemented a worrying separation between citizens and green-card holders in the distribution of stimulus checks which left millions of tax-paying migrants excluded. Moreover, President Donald Trump instrumentalized the crisis to promote his campaign to “suspend immigration” to protect American citizens.

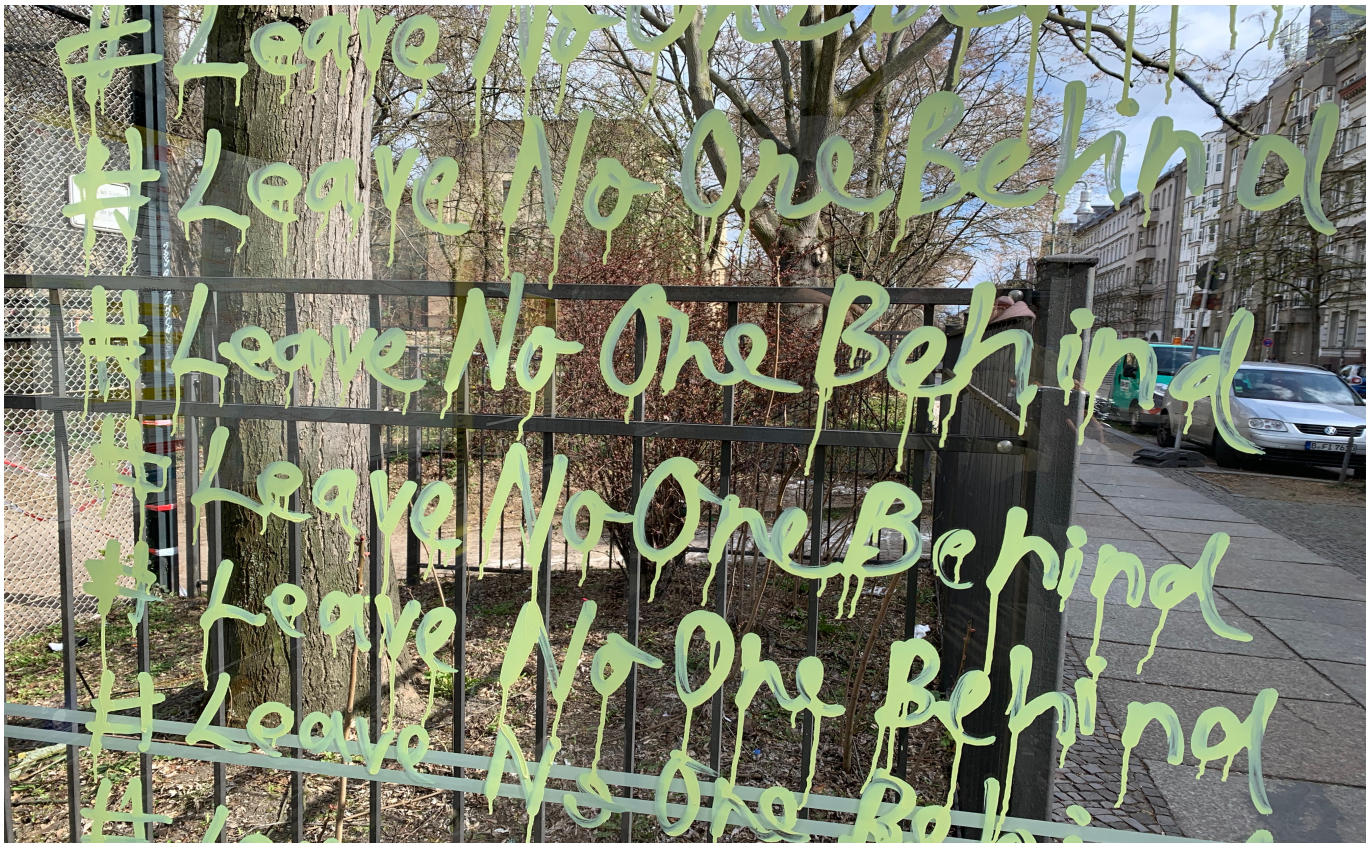

Image 3: #leavenoonebehind street graffiti. Copyright: Tunay Altay. April 2020.

Such governmental campaigns, however, did not remain unanswered by civil society resistance. #leavenoonebehind, for instance, emerged as a call for action to address the disparities that noncitizens and displaced people have been suffering globally during the pandemic. The Twitter/Facebook campaign quickly gained popularity as a petition with more than 300,000 signatures that called for governments to include migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, and internally displaced people to be included in their responses.

With the rising number of noncitizen residents in Europe and in the US, I argue that the governments should think critically about how much they are invested in the figure of the "citizen" and the consequences of promoting such disparities in implementing emergency strategies. Focusing on the struggles of foreign residents during COVID-19 raises the following question: What are the limits of responsibility that governments hold toward their foreign residents?

As we are counting down the days to return to "normal," COVID-19 has shown that foreign residents and other noncitizens can be excluded from rights and services as a consequence of a border logic in times of crisis. This leaves millions of people in Europe and in the US at risk and forces them into bureaucratic uncertainty. In order to leave no one behind, the governments

should seek ways to diminish the disparity between citizens and noncitizens and treat everyone who resides in their country as part of a community whose members have the right to return home. It is, however, not easy to undo a deeply entrenched logic of governmentality which ranks people according to their legal status. As we see in the case of COVID-19, on-the-ground solidarity activism and other actions of democracy-from-below may have the capacity to challenge the border logic which normalizes the marginalization and exclusion of noncitizens. And there lies a powerful lesson to learn about borders and citizenship during the current pandemic.

First submitted on 13/04/2020, revised version from 11/05/2020

[1] The Robert Koch Institute is a German federal government agency and research institute responsible for disease control and prevention.

[2] Sailesh's gender pronouns are their/them.

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#Witnessing Corona

This article was simultaneously published on boasblogs. Witnessing Corona is a joint blog series by the Blog Medical Anthropology / Medizinethnologie, Curare: Journal of Medical Anthropology, the Global South Studies Center Cologne, and boasblogs.

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