

“The best passports in the world” – The structural violence of EU visa policies

Just as none of us is beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.

— Edward W. Said: *Culture and Imperialism*, 1993

Media outlets around the world have time and again enlightened their readers and viewers about “[the best passports in the world](#)” in the past several years, among them [CNN](#), [The Financial Times](#), [Business Insider](#), and [The Telegraph](#). In April 2016, [Arton Capital’s Passport Index](#) has launched an interactive colour-coded map aiming to collect and rank passports according to criteria such as power and ‘hospitality’, each leading to remarkably different results.

Along the same lines, [The Daily Good published an infographic](#) in their Lifestyle section in 2014, inviting their readers to find out how powerful their passport is. Despite the rather competitive wording of the headline, their examination endorses a hint of criticism towards the structural inequalities frozen into the map they produced. Indeed, the author stresses the weight the small booklets still hold in a world of technological domination and the disadvantage that developing (and formerly colonial) countries thus experience: “More than a simple grant of access into a country, passports and the visas they contain are a reflection of *geopolitics*, the relationship between two nations, and a country’s stature relative to the rest of the world” (*my italics*). However, the publications reusing this map and the map published on the Passport Index, as well as the interactive annual map by [Henley & Partner](#) (since 2006) mostly go on about the advantages of visa-free mobility and place the article in their Travel section next to recommendations for culinary holidays in South Africa and “The world’s best travel photos”. What is more, these maps are directed exclusively at the power and privilege a nationality holds, eradicating from representation individual aspirations, greeds and grievances resulting from these artificial lines and man-made documents, with the exception of the Passport Index allowing comparisons between a nation’s freedom and

openness, already a powerful tool in dismantling underlying contradictions.

The colonial present: a short overview of European immigration policies

Whereas all E.U. countries are in the top 15 of the Passport Index enjoying freedom of mobility, their own foreign policy has turned into a [system of geopolitical apartheid](#), especially during the last decades, discriminating against nationals of the poorest countries in the world through lists of welcome and unwelcome nationalities. Apart from mobility constraints from afar through visa restrictions, the E.U. has engaged in more and more exclusive guarding of its external borders with fences and modern technologies, making it the "[world's deadliest border](#)". At the same time, through a system that attempts to attract certain migrant groups, their policies have increased the appeal to try and reach the shores of this promised continent, including the [aggressive recruitment of foreign doctors and nurses](#).

This policy is not new to the European Union countries who have opened and closed their borders at will for nationals of former colonies, so-called 'guest workers' and refugees, ever since drawing the [all but final state lines](#) in Europe after the First World War. The new millennium saw drastic politics of seclusion and the emergence of 'Fortress Europe' which allows insiders and states on the '[White List](#)' to enjoy the freedom of a 'borderless' union while blocking outsiders at its shores with high-level security systems and policies that force unwanted migrants to put their life at risk before granting them their right to seek asylum.

The perversion of this system has been upheld throughout its existence, granting freedom of movement to some while excluding others and thus [reinforcing existing inequalities](#). The power exercised through visa politics leads to a categorization of people into those who are allowed to move and those who remain trapped in the local – and a quick look at the Passport Index map shows that these include (or rather: exclude) the former colonies in the Middle East and Africa while those who created the border, namely the former colonial powers of the 'West' are coloured in the dark shades of freedom: freedom of mobility, freedom of work and leisure and consequently the [freedom to create one's own narrative](#), a freedom withdrawn from those who have not been involved in drawing the lines that now entrap them.

Geopolitics of border controls: fences in the sand

The restrictions privileging holders of some nationalities over others have serious implications for the people involved. Whereas a French software engineer in Northern Iraq is an 'expat', his Iraqi counterpart coming to Paris is most likely an 'asylum seeker' at best or an 'illegal immigrant' at worst. Identities, narratives of belonging and labels are created through visa policies and resulting actions of "[bordering, ordering and othering](#)", recreating and fostering existing inequalities and their underlying colonial logic.

"The best passport": policies of privilege and suppression

Mapping the world, as Ian Chambers [reminds us](#), is not a geographical fact but a violent act of territorial and civilizational division, a construction of 's' as opposed to 'them'. These often arbitrary lines, drawn by the colonial powers in the 19th and 20th centuries, create a narrative of power, burying those who have been unlucky enough to be born on the wrong side of the fence. Furthermore, not only are stories, aspirations and grievances of individuals outside these power lines excluded from representation, their image is created [in absentia of their voices](#).

When deconstructing the privileging cartography of visa politics, the "[question is about who is excluded from freedom of movement and not who is entitled to move in a sealed and divided world of homogeneous states with strong borders](#)". Reinterpreting the lines in a cartographic discourse enables us to challenge common perceptions of reality in science and journalism and to redefine the power of the map that embeds popular as well as subaltern narratives that have vanished in the historical practice of mapping as method of exclusion. In doing so, we can make borders critically and culturally productive by re-examining what lies beyond the "deeply reductive framing of social and historical space" (Ian Chambers) that is the border. This currently happens around the globe in different projects dedicated to re- or [counter-mapping](#), such as [Views of the World](#) or [feminist counter-topographies](#).

When taking a look into the legal framework that constitutes [who is entitled to move](#), one finds a heterogeneity of rights depending on nationality and status of the individual seeking entry. This comprises tourists, work migrants, refugees and 'illegals' and results in vastly different treatments both before and after the border. The most prominent hurdle to being admitted into 'Fortress Europe' is financial, posing severe restrictions for those wishing to obtain a Schengen visa. Visa politics aim to control migration from afar and create a global order where only a small ('Western') elite actually possesses freedom of mobility.

Top 10 origins of people applying for asylum in the EU

First-time applications in 2015, in thousands

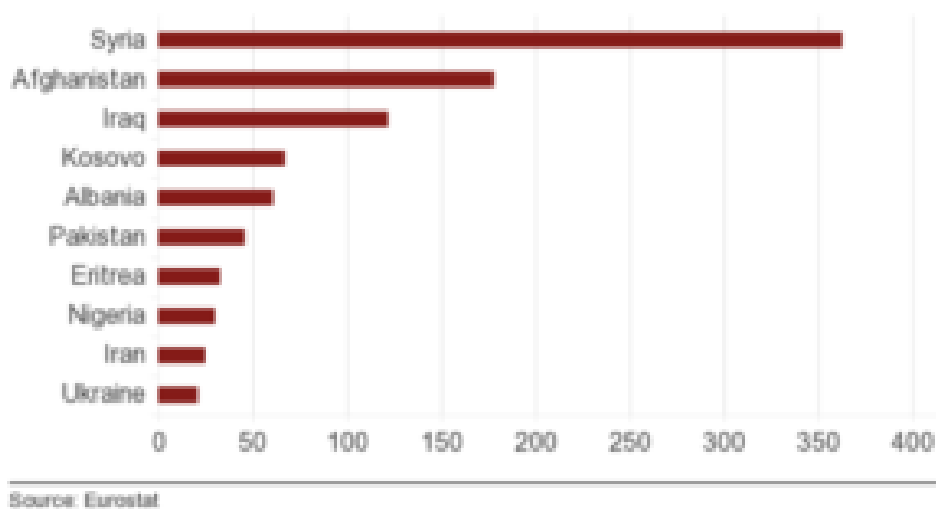


Figure 1: Prevalent nationalities of asylum seekers in Europe. Source: Eurostat (2016)

Guarding the frontier: territories versus benefits

As Geographer [Eric Neumayer from the London School of Economics](#) puts it, “the poorer, the less democratic and the more exposed to armed political conflict the target country is, the more likely that visa restrictions are in place against its passport holders”. Common sense indicates that people from those states are the ones most needy of protection outside these harmful conditions.

Figure 1 shows which passports the majorities of asylum seekers coming to the EU in 2015 held. According to the logic of migration policies, since these countries neither qualify as very rich nor as very safe, a passport from either one will not grant access to many countries. And indeed, eight out of the ten nations rank lowest on the Passport Index with Afghanistan virtually at the bottom of the list at rank 94. Apart from Albania (46) and Ukraine (48), all of these countries are within the top 13 ‘worst passports’ list, leaving their holders little freedom to choose their paths in the world and restricting their access to the E.U. to either high-skill work migration, application for asylum, or illegal migration. When choosing the third option or being denied asylum, these nationals find themselves outside of the law, either hiding to avoid deportation or ending up ‘tolerated’ in the destination country when it is not possible to deport them for various reasons. They lead a ‘shadow’ life, remain unrepresented,

and with no official institution to turn to become the very 'criminals' as which they are framed, if only by the crime of lacking registration. And more often than perpetrators, they become victims of exploitation, for example in conditions of unofficial employment. Indeed, it has been proven that sectors like the Spanish agricultural industry could not function properly without illegal immigrants working for low wages [in deplorable conditions](#). Thus, European visa politics create a shadow market benefiting the E.U.'s economy by exploiting people lacking the right passport and forced into isolation and illegality.

Immigration threats: colonial discourse and rhetoric of exclusion

This [structural violence](#), illegalizing the paths and narratives of those most in need of moving, is upheld not only by surveillance technologies and physical frontiers but also by a rhetoric of exclusion, creating borders between 'us' and 'them' - one might say this guarantees a continuation of colonialism by other means. Whereas the term 'globalization' suggests a confluence of nation-states into a global society, it goes hand in hand with the reinforcement of an increasingly [complex network of exclusion](#) framed in a broader nexus of freedom of mobility. While 'illegal' movements threaten privileging power structures, the resulting policies of exclusion are framed as a positive 'freedom' for those included: freedom *to* move and freedom *from* external dangers the 'criminal migrant' poses to the union in Europe.



Figure 2): Poster by right-wing UKIP party for the 2014 UK elections. Source: <http://www.ukipmidsex.org>

The UKIP election poster is a good example of the rhetoric used in order to keep the existing power structures intact. Bigo and Guild in their work on movement into and within Europe describe the everyday tactics of domination as a two step system, beginning with 'othering', an essential tool for creating and preserving the perception of shared meaning in the modern nation-state. By homogenizing and distorting a simplified image of a potentially threatening 'other' in contrast to a unified 'us', perceptions of a ['Clash of Civilizations'](#) are artificially invoked. This leaves us with two simple and antagonistic frames for straightforward action: keeping out the 'other' means keeping out danger. "These are cultural policy devices, transferred into the field of geopolitics, using the same concept of border as line of demarcation, line of division".

The second step then is administrative application that translates established borders into policies and practices, or 'taking control' as the poster suggests. Instead of allowing grievances and desires of individuals to surface, immigrants are marked as 'invaders' driven by the imperative pull towards the wealthy 'West' that has to defend itself against the ['flood'](#) of economic opportunists that are not entitled to mobility, in contrast to 'expats' and tourists from the 'West': The choice (or lack thereof) between multiple identities and politics of belonging results in productive power relations and the reinforcement of forms of domination and inequality as fostered by frontiers. These practices are not least conducted through the use of 'explanatory' maps, geopolitical contributions to means of othering.

The result of these policies are official narratives of 'immigration problems' and tackling them - a discourse framed by the notion of migratory movements as a threat to sovereignty, security and culture of the European society and its values. Maps and notions of territorial sovereignty are important means of justification and implementation of these narratives, with one of the most prominent manifestations being the border fence marking the frontier of the EU between Hungary and Serbia. However, [the protectionism behind the rhetoric might not be aimed at protecting a territory as much as they are at protecting access to benefits and the reproduction of power relations](#). Notions of 'welfare migration' fuelled by greed more than need suggest that European policy makers are rather keen to keep global power relations in place.

Where to go from here?

We began with a colour-coded map indicating the 'best' and 'worst' passports, obliterating

the geopolitical strategies that created it. Whereas this division is an indicator of privilege, it fails to represent the innumerable narratives created by underlying policies, including deliberate labelling of homogenized groups of people, the grievances resulting from or amplified by these practices of bordering, and a rhetoric of securitization in order to justify them. It can only be described as cynical when metaphors such as a 'flood' of immigrants leads to policies of seclusion which in turn literally result in people drowning in their attempt to reach 'Fortress Europe'. Human trafficking, forced prostitution and other human rights violations are embedded in the logics of frontiers restricted by visa politics, and the voices of people excluded by this system remain unheard, their narratives unrepresented, their identity reduced to an 'other', a criminal, an 'illegal': "[\[o\]thers are needed and therefore constantly produced and reproduced to maintain the cohesion in the formatted order of a territorially demarcated society](#)".

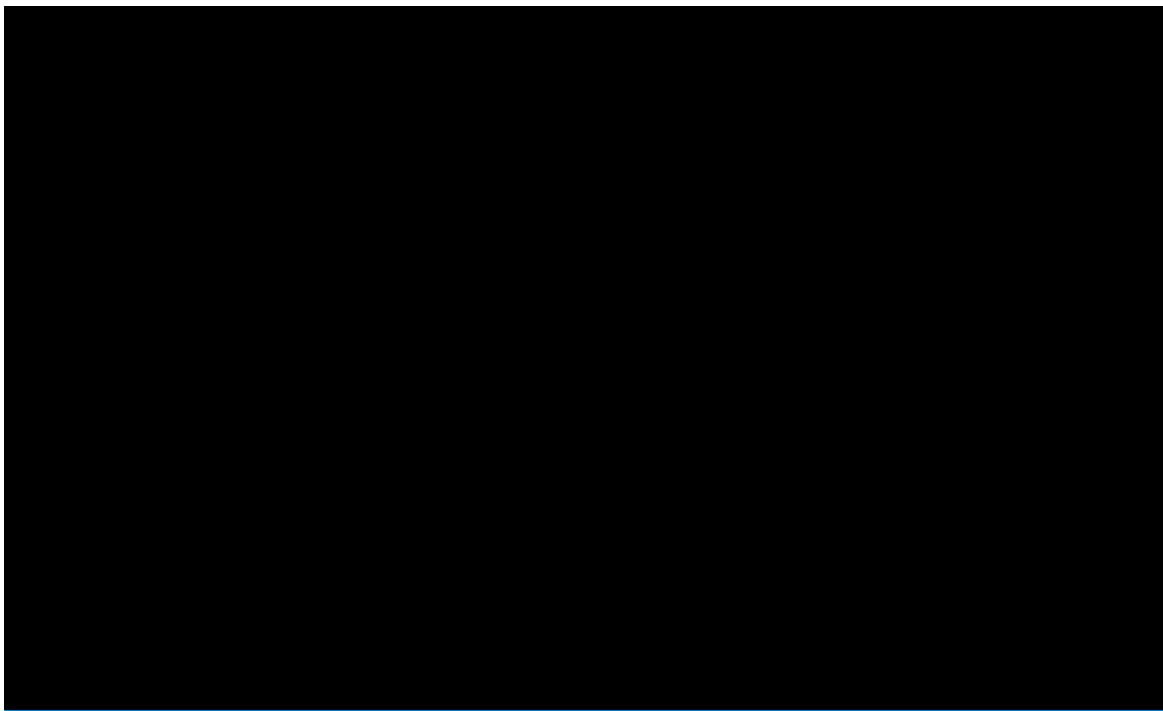
Both through political and administrative practices of exclusion, namely visa restrictions, border controls and systematic exclusion, and a rhetoric of othering, the European Union institutionalized a contradictory and [amoral system](#) of freedom and securitization for those allowed in. 'Illegals' are exploited by European companies while at the same time images of a 'migrant threat' are instrumentalized not only to justify discrimination but at the same time smoothing the way for global policies of control, not least through their [neighbourhood policies](#).

By steadily normalizing these contradictions in the public discourse and fostering entitlement to sovereignty, completely incompatible with their aggressive economic attitude towards the states they exclude, the European Union (re-)creates [geographies of privilege](#), making sure that the [colonial present](#) is continuously reproduced.

In the light of this, can we imagine an alternative map, one that takes into account the narratives of those that are hidden, 'illegal' or even dead? Can we imagine a different picture represented by the lines that have become virtual and physical fences and the victims created by them?

While no map could possibly display all the hopes and grievances of people fleeing their homes in search for a better future in Europe, there are attempts of people trying to take back the map, challenge its alleged neutrality – make it productive. I will therefore end this essay with another effort of counter-mapping, this time created by the United Nations High

Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)), aiming to pin and thus connect to it the humanitarian catastrophe European border controls have created in the past two years alone, and only taking into account its borders at the Mediterranean Sea. While maps like these by themselves will not be able to entirely change perceptions of a 'refugee crisis' or unveil the irony of a 'flood' of migrants, it might contribute to an alternative discourse. Despite of centuries of Western geopolitical domination, putting obstacles in the way wherever possible, such an alternative discourse could allow for the accounts of those that cross these borders so as to claim their human right to lead a self-determined life.



UNHCR: Number of Dead and Missing Migrants

Unsere Zeit's new series on [Citizenship and Territoriality](#) presents international, original contributions on the question of how the interplay of citizenship and territory works in a globalized world, and how it should be, and can be, changed.

Title image: Syrian refugees protest at the platform of Budapest Keleti railway station. Budapest, Hungary, 4 September 2015. Photo by Mstyslav Chernov [via Wikimedia Commons](#), [CC-BY-SA-4.0](#)