



## **Of borders and Borders: from here to the moon**

By Miša Krenčeyová

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Bratislava and Vienna, the capital cities of Slovakia and Austria, are merely 55km (or 34 miles) apart. I was born in the former and live in the latter, and with the regulations of the Schengen area, I usually can decide to go home and some two hours later knock on the door of my parents' flat — without having to take my passport out of my bag, or even carry it with me. But when I was born in Bratislava in 1983, Vienna could just as well have been on the moon. Slovakia and Austria were still separated by the Iron Curtain, which used to divide Europe into East and West. Between 1945 and 1989, over 1000 people, civilians and soldiers, died at the border crossings between Austria and then-Czechoslovakia. Most of the civilians were killed through shots or from the electric shock of a high voltage power line. Many committed suicide. Others drowned in the Morava or Danube rivers, died when their airplane was shot down or as they tried to break through the border with their car. Two suffered from a heart attack right before the border troops caught them. One was torn apart by border watch dogs.

From the perspective of those who used to write it, I was born on the 'wrong' side of history — in Bratislava, in the Eastern Bloc. But my parents wanted the best for me — and the best at that time was simply 'the West'. Some years after 1989, I attended

primary school in a small Austrian village, right across the border, together with other children, whose parents could afford or facilitate it. When time had come for high school, the next 'logical' step was Vienna, so I boarded the train for an hour-long ride, six days a week, for four years. In the beginning, I needed to show my passport at the train station. Every day on the way to the platform, I passed through a special, narrow room enclosed by plastic grey walls and collected a stamp, which documented my entrance to Austria. After some time, I just opened the passport at the page with my picture and a border officer compared it with my face. He nodded almost imperceptibly and waved me through. Eventually, the officer's cubicle remained empty. I did not anymore have to come to the station early in case there was a long queue at the passport control. In the end, I just walked by and boarded the train.

I eventually moved to Vienna in my third year at university, seventeen years ago. The train ride back home still has its appeal, because it brings me from 'home' to home — but I don't need to be anxious whether or not I will be able to cross the border. I know that I will not die from shots and that nobody will try to prevent me from entering the other side.

It is the pandemic that has given a new shape to a border that seemed to have long been gone. I cannot board a train to Bratislava now and simply cross the border, because no trains are going there. If I was to enter Slovakia, I would have to be tested in a state facility and then taken to 'state quarantine' — I couldn't even make myself find out what that exactly means. I just know that wherever they would take me, I probably couldn't hold my online classes - and I'm ashamed to wonder whether there is

wifi in state quarantine. But I definitely couldn't see my parents, who would be the only reason for me to pass the border now in the first place — and equally not to pass it, since they belong to the 'high risk group'.

When the lockdown started and the borders were closed, I felt a helplessness that I only knew from hearsay. If anything happened to my parents, I couldn't just go back home. Without a means of transport, 'state quarantine' feels like an odd privilege. But then — my parents are still just 55 kilometers away. The parents of my partner are in Damascus. 2328 km away. More than one border separates them. Needless to know their exact number — he couldn't possibly pass the last one. Maybe he would be shot or die from the electric shock of a high voltage power line. Damascus is now the city on the moon. And the re-shaping of the border had started much earlier. It was cemented in the minds of Central Europeans in the year 2015, when in the 'summer of migration', thousands of people were crossing Europe, seeking refuge from war, conflict, and the inequities of global capitalism. It was then that the border was closed for the first time again — in a very different way, and only for some.

But all borders are connected, they depend on each other — especially if some are re-opened (only for some) and some stay closed. When 'all this' is over, I will board the train and go knock on the door of my parents' flat. My partner will call his family in Damascus — most often in vain, because they have no internet or their power is cut or because of some other result of repression. He will do what he has been doing for the past seven years — sustain family ties over a distance that is impossible to overcome

physically. For now. But maybe one day, 'that' will also be over — and the moon will be the moon again, for all of us.

