Landscape in transition in the shadow of 2022 Russia's invasion in Ukraine – notes from Hungary

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Abstract:

This research note focuses on two phenomena: the transformations in the landscape in Hungary as an effect of Russia's invasion in the Ukraine and the welcome/help centers that were established to channel mobility and provide a temporary safe space. I suggest that liminality (which serves as a main explanatory category) is characteristic of both. It is stated that in this context that the bodies of refugees are reminders of the existence of the (state) border, which gets reaffirmed by the process of welcoming and hosting and is also reflected in the visual reminders in the landscape. I also divide the management of the refugee crisis into three phases: spontaneous action, institutionalization, and sanitization. With the phase of sanitization (removing the physically existing "indicators" of the war, including refugees, volunteers, signs, and queues) the reality and severity of the war can be concealed, and the "normality" can be reinstated. Research is based on field observations and interviews taken in March 2022 in Budapest, Kisvárda, Vásárosnamény, Barabás, and Beregsurány in Hungary.

Keywords:

Liminality, (affective) borderscape, Russian invasion in Ukraine, Ukrainian refugee crisis, Hungary

Since 24th February 2022 to mid-March, more than 500 000 refugees entered Hungary fleeing the war in Ukraine. The overwhelming majority travelled further (e.g. to Poland, Czechia, Germany) and made only a quick stop in Hungary, but as of 27th March, 7749 applications were registered to temporary protected status[2]. Independent of whether they had spent just a couple of hours in a train station or have stayed for weeks with a host family, the arrival of a massive number

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2 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/30/hungary-accused-of-inflating-number-of-ukrainian-arrivals-to-seek-eu-funds?fbclid=IwAR0V5wNNAkt0bZsVhjik-DKWkiCuth8pFzgabzRkBfmf1T_4BtlulNFOCsc

of refugees impacted not only the daily life of hosts, volunteers, and local people, but induced changes in the landscape. These transitions in space and landscape stand in the focus of the presented research note.

The footage of Ukrainian refugees has become mediated through diverse media outlets or social media, and it was just a click away on the internet. Nevertheless, witnessing the human drama in the quiet villages nearby the border or at the train stations busy with commuters, prompts a deeper realization of the ongoing events. The women and children sitting on suitcases, signs popping up in Cyrillic or yellow and blue, or the hasty set-up of tents and tables of volunteers interfere with the familiar palimpsest of our daily life. The assemblage of refugees, aid workers, uniforms, civils, local people, the written or drawn messages, the audiovisual, sensory, and somatic impressions compose a landscape that brings the reality of war closer.

Hereby, I focus on two phenomena: the transformations in the landscape as an effect of war and the welcome/help centers that were established to channel mobility and provide a temporary safe area. I suggest that liminality is characteristic of both. First appearing in cultural anthropology (Turner, 1973), the term liminality can be described as "discontinuity in the social fabric, social space and history", which "occurs when people are in a transition from one station of life to another, or from one culturally defined stage in the life-cycle to another" (Shields, 1991, p. 83-84, cited in Azaryahu, 2005, p. 120). The 'in-between' state is valid for the landscape, which is compiled of temporary signs piled upon each other, easily (re)moveable, but it also refers to the help centers, which are spaces temporarily adapted to host people whose social fabric, familiar space, and personal history have been dramatically interrupted. Additionally, the physical presence of refugees not only brings the reality of war closer, but their bodies are reminders of the existence of the border. In a recent article, Juliet J. Fall and Giada Peterle advocate for the exploration of how the "bodies are themselves sites of continual border-making" (Paasi et al., 2022, p. 7). In this sense, the bodies of women and children arriving at the transit places (like train stations) carry the border with themselves which gets reaffirmed by the process of welcoming and hosting (e.g. registration, separated place in waiting rooms) and is also reflected in the visual reminders in the landscape, like welcome notes, placed in public space.

My contribution is based on field observations taken on 17th and 18th March in Budapest, the capital of Hungary, in Kisvárda and Vásárosnamény, two local towns near the Ukrainian-Hungarian border, and in the border crossing points and help centers in Barabás and Beregsurány in Hungary. Interviews were conducted with aid organizations and volunteers at each site and, in addition,

photos and videos were recorded. The analysis is biased because of my positionality: being a Hungarian researcher who has been conducting research in Transcarpathia, Ukraine for years and who was living in Poland when the war erupted, my observations are filtered and interpreted through "subjective and individual values such as perceptions, emotions, the observer's own identity" (Bettoni, 2021, p. 81), and influenced by altering intensity and nature of visual impacts I was exposed to in Poland in comparison to Hungary.

The analysis of visual material was inspired by the interdisciplinary research field of linguistic landscape (LL) studies. According to a commonly cited definition, the linguistic landscape covers the survey of "[T]he language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings" (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p. 25), but in a broad sense, any sign which is visible in the public space can be the subject of research. LL may provide information about the users of a certain place, and the inherent power-relations between languages so as the bottom-up initiatives challenge those power structures (Csernicskó & Laihonen, p. 2015). Due to the short time and constantly changing linguistic landscape, instead of conducting a thorough quantitative analysis, I will reflect on the most common features.

In the first couple of days of the war, thousands of autochthonous Hungarians, members of the minority community residing in Transcarpathia, crossed the border. For them, the information provided in Hungarian was sufficient and since an overwhelming majority of them have Hungarian citizenship as well (Tátrai et al., 2017), they were exempted from further registration. But as the days passed, they were significantly outnumbered by Ukrainian and Russian speakers, and third-country nationals (students and guest workers), to whom the often monolingual Hungarian signs were impossible to decode. This prompted the appearance of new multilingual signs and Cyrillic script. The management of the refugee wave – including the preparation of the multilingual signs – in the first three weeks can be divided into three phases.

The first few days could be described as the period of *spontaneous* actions. We might recall the photos and videos showing women and children standing by or walking along the road upon crossing the border. Soldiers carrying luggage, kids, or supporting the elderly. Hot tea, coffee, and snacks were available on the hastily set up tables, where the universally comprehensible English words (tea, coffee) appeared most often. Others were holding papers with names of cities where they offered a lift. However, the rides seemed (and some were) improvised, according to the reports, the majority of refugees were waiting for relatives or friends who would take them to a safe destination. Therefore, in this phase, the

first few hundred meters of pavement right after the border crossing points can be comprehended as a quintessential space of liminality: refugees have not only crossed the state border, but they left behind one period of their lives with its well-known spatial co-ordinates and they were waiting for another stage to start, literally in standby mode, and physically standing on/by the road.

As an aid worker recalled, these first few days were chaotic and dangerous, especially after sunset, as cars were manoeuvring among exhausted people. Importantly, the activities in this short period were bottom-up initiatives, either implemented by individuals or initiated by rapidly set-up Facebook groups. Similarly, the first welcome points – offering overnight stay and hot meals – established in the nearby towns and villages were instigated by local mayors who co-operated with residents, churches, schools, and entrepreneurs to transform school buildings or culture houses into temporary shelters. The first wave of refugees arrived in Budapest with delays of a few hours/days – based on media reports and interviews – where, upon arrival, they were welcomed by civic organizations and a crowd of eager but disorganized volunteers.

The second phase we might call *institutionalization*, both at the border area and in Budapest. Several government decisions were introduced to ease the transit process. For instance, since 27th February, all five border crossing points operate for 24 hours (normally only two are open 24/7). From the same day, traveling by train in Hungary or the use of public transportation in Budapest is free for refugees from Ukraine. On 26th February, the government launched an aid program called Híd Kárpátaljáért (Bridge for Transcarpathia). Its main aim is to provide aid (alimentary and medical support) primarily to Transcarpathia and – if possible – beyond[3]. While traveling in the Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county (which borders Ukraine), the name of this initiative appeared on yellow information boards along the road, clearly indicating that this is a new and temporary sign (Figures 1 and 2), which marks the road to the help centers or donation warehouses. The symbol of the bridge refers to the name of the program, though it is not translated into other languages. 'Help center' is indicated in three languages (Hungarian, English, and Ukrainian).

Since early March, for safety, humanitarian, and security reasons, the immediate vicinity of border crossing points has been evacuated and the roads are controlled by the police and military officers. Therefore, upon entering Hungary, the refugees board a bus or minivan which directly transports them to the help center established in the nearby municipalities. I visited two of these centers in Beregsurány and Barabás.

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3   https://hungarytoday.hu/ukraine-humanitarian-council-government-refugees-per-capita/

Figure 1, 2: Road signs to the help center in Beregsurány (top) and to a donation warehouse (bottom).

Author's photo.

Each help center is run by one aid organization (e.g. Beregsurány is the responsibility of Malteses, Barabás is managed by Caritas). Food, medical care, and accommodation are available for a maximum of three nights. Upon request, they help in arranging travel and paperwork. The help centers are established in the buildings of the local houses of culture, located in the center of these municipalities. Typically, these buildings host public events like concerts, film screenings, and school celebrations. In current circumstances, these edifices and their surroundings have been converted into transit spaces, where the refugee's mobility is interrupted for only a brief amount of time. These temporary, emergency spots "are produced by an assemblage of people on the move, humanitarian actors, border police, and borders themselves" (Pallister-Wilkins, in Jones et al., 2017, p. 6). Despite marking a temporary stop on the road of refugees, the help centers are far from being motionless: buses regularly bring new groups of people, while others are leaving. Aid workers alternate shifts. Temporariness is inherent in the containers, which were set up to enlarge the capacity of space (storage, offices, first aid point). This quickly removable solution will be evacuated and dismantled when there is no need for them anymore. The unfolding linguistic landscape is also temporary and ever-changing: notes and messages appear, get updated, or are deleted as they are fixed only with pins, blue tack, or tape. As shown in Figures 3 and 4, sometimes the signs in Ukrainian are displayed in handwriting, added as an extra layer to the existing sign, indicating the rapidity of intervention as well.

Figure 3: The sign indicating a female toilet in the help center in Barabás

Author's photo

Figure 4: A box of muesli bars at the donation warehouse in Kisvárda.

Author's photo

The information posted by the aid organization that runs the given center provides orientation but also provides information on how to travel further (e.g. train timetables). The listed job advertisements recruit workers to distant parts of the country.

The third big group of signs we can discover in help centers are messages, notes, and drawings left by the refugees (Figure 5). Based on their research conducted in Lesvos, Wagner Tsoni and Frank comprehend these 'writings on the walls' as "the experiential topography of the borderscape" which "often express the complexities of identity construction and social belonging within localities embedded in the epicentre of national and international border" (Wagner Tsoni & Frank 2019, p. 17). The layers of chalk drawings at the playground in Beregsurány (Figure 5) that are layered on top of each other resonate to the rhythm of the waves of arriving people. The dates, names, or Instagram nicknames can be interpreted as identity markers left as anchors amidst the insecurities and within the "socio-spatial limbo experienced in the centre" (Wagner Tsoni & Frank, 2019, p. 13). The mundanity of colorful hearts or evidence of a game of tic-tac-toe conveys "normality" amidst extraordinary circumstances. The testimonies like 'Slava Ukraini' (Glory to Ukraine) might illustrate longing and affection towards the home country, and

can thus be interpreted as elements of the affective borderscape, defined as "a lens that allows the exploration of borders not as singular lines, but as multidimensional sites of affective generation, investment and contestation through everyday practices, both those deemed momentous and the more mundane ones" (Wagner Tsoni 2019, p. 131).

Figure 5: Chalk messages in the playground. Help centre, Beregsurány, 17th March 2022.

Author's photo

From help centers, those who were not picked up by a family member or friend traveled to Budapest, arriving either at Nyugati (Western) or Keleti (Eastern) railway station. In these railway stations, the management of refugees was dominated by bottom-up initiatives, implemented by volunteering individuals, spontaneous Facebook groups, and companies. NGOs, such as Migration Aid and Budapest Bike Maffia, played a crucial role in organizing accommodation and travel. Both were present during the so-called 'migration crisis' in the summer of 2015 (Cantat, 2016) as well and have been initiators of several projects targeting diverse groups of society in need (homeless, Roma). Universities, the city of Budapest, public and private companies, and families offered accommodation and boarding for refugees. In contrast to the help centers along the border, in Budapest, the aid work was not coordinated by one responsible organization. Instead, the tents and tables of aid and charity organizations, churches, and NGOs were placed

next to each other, creating a colorful and disorganized blending of logos, names, numbers, arrows, languages, pictures, and pictograms. Figures 6 and 7 show that even the sign indicating the direction to the pop-up help center was prepared in a DIY way in the Keleti railway station, which is in stark contrast with the uniform signs I saw in the help centers along the border. Despite the best efforts of civils, the infrastructure (e.g. toilet) was expanded slowly.

Figure 6, 7 Signs indicating the help centres in Budapest, Keleti Railway station (left) and in Barabás (right).

Author's photo.

Both railway stations handle tens of thousands of passengers daily, thus the presence of the masses, the bodies of refugees have become part of the urban landscape at these junctions. Anybody could see the arriving people, mainly women with children, carrying only a suitcase or backpack. In the help centers I visited in Beregsurány or Barabás, the refugees were directly transported to the center, thus they were not or less visible in their – presumably – most vulnerable mental and physical condition. The registration, eating, and napping took place inside the building, behind the fences in a safe space. While in Budapest, due to the lack of infrastructure, refugees were more exposed. When boarding a train, unintentionally, I passed by families queuing for a hot meal or mothers nursing their babies. The physical appearance and the bodies of refugees were constant reminders of the war (Figures 8-9).

Figure 8, 9: Refugees and commuters at 6.45 am on 17th March 2022 at the Keleti railway station.

Author's photo.

In the case of Budapest, a third phase of the management of the refugee wave can be distinguished. A swift government decision (issued on Friday evening, on 17th March) issues the evacuation of all aid activity from the two stations by midnight 20th March (Sunday). The rationale was that the government set up a help center in a sports and exhibition hall (BOK=Budapest Olympic Centre), where the refugees can be hosted under proper/better circumstances. The centrally organized care facility provides medical, legal, psychiatric, and general support in one place. Importantly, in this new regime, refugees are required to get off the train at a station further from the center and board a bus that takes them directly to the BOK. After three weeks of civil-led, bottom-up, organically developing refugee care, the state overtook a part of these tasks[4].

Nevertheless, this meant that the signs of civil activity disappeared from the landscape and from public space: the volunteers, the tents and tables, the compassionate faces of nuns, students, and grandmothers offering food and drink or coins to use the public toilet at the train stations. In my view, even more important is that this way not only the infrastructure of aid, but the physical body, of the refugee, and what it symbolizes: the war and its consequence, the human suffering and misery was also evacuated from the public space and got hidden from the eyes of people. Consequently, I refer to this third phase as *sanitization*, a term used for the treatment/criminalization of homelessness (Amster, 2003). Sanitization hereby refers to the clearing of space and removal of the physically existing "indicators" of the war, including refugees, volunteers, signs, and queues. By doing so, the reality and severity of the war can be concealed, and (two weeks prior the parliamentary elections) the "normality" can be reinstated. Naturally, this is a presumption only, triggered by first impressions and it would require thorough fieldwork to explore how it affects different parties (refugees, volunteers, officials, residents). However, I believe that this case highlights the relevance of "how the human body mediates processes that operate across space and scales" (Fall and Peterle in Paasi, 2022, p. 7).

The cleansing of mainly bottom-up civic help centers in Budapest does not mean that the capital was left without a reminder of the ongoing war. On 14th March a guerrilla memorial was installed by Mihály Kolodko in Budapest[5].

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4 Nevertheless the biggest transit shelter is operated by the Migration Aid NGO, created and sustained from donations, and and the homeless shelters run by Budapest host other groups of refugees (https://merce.hu/2022/03/18/allami-segitseg-nelkul-uzemel-az-orszag-legnagyobb-menkultszalloja/; https://telex.hu/belfold/2022/03/10/nyugati-palyaudvar-budapestre-erkezo-ukrajnai-menekultek)

5 https://444.hu/2022/03/14/mini-putyin-a-kinyujtott-ujjon-kolodko-mihaly-oriasi-miniszoborral-reagalt-a-haborura

Kolodko is a Transcarpathian sculptor who has been living in Budapest since 2016. He earned a reputation thanks to his popular mini statues memorializing famous artists, mundane figures, or cartoon characters. Typically, the minifigures blend into the landscape (e.g. sitting on a step or rail), but when discovered usually bring a smile to the face of the viewer, who recognizes the beloved fairy-tale heroes of his/her childhood or the subtly caricatured figure of a famous musician.

Figure 10, 11: Mihály Kolodko's mini statue in the Moscow promenade in Budapest.

Author's photo.

His latest statue is in stark contrast to his previous artworks. It is compiled of two parts: a marble column, with the symbol of *tryzub* (the coat of arms of Ukraine), and a bronze minifigure on its top. Instead of adding his figure to an already existing object, this time he placed it on a new pedestal, dedicated to this specific project. This arrangement does not meld into the landscape, but on the contrary, it attracts attention from a distance. When taking a closer look, we can

discover that the marble column depicts a middle finger. On the top of it balancing the bronze mini statue: a warship in which the caricature figurine of the Russian president, Vladimir Putin is placed (Figures 10-11).

The composition can be interpreted as a reference to the famous message that the defenders of the Snake Island sent to the Russian warship on 24th February[6]. The boat is also "equipped" with a bent cannon barrel, a symbol that appeared in a previous work of Kolodko. Installed in 2017, it portrays a Soviet tank with the inscription "*Ruszkik haza*/Russians go home", echoing the major slogan of the 1956 Uprising in Hungary that erupted against Soviet oppression. For those who are familiar with that mini tank, repetition of the motive of the bent cannon, an invocation of the memory of 1956, stands as a reminder and invites contemplation about the parallels between the situation in the 1956 Uprising in Hungary and the ongoing war in Ukraine. In this sense, the raised finger might also be interpreted as an exclamation mark, a bold statement for Hungarians, that sharply contrasts the events of the present (i.e. the Hungarian government's current foreign politics) with the country's past.

The geographical location of a statue might amplify or enrich its message (Árvay and Foote, 2020). This is exactly the case with Kolodko's statue standing on the Moscow promenade (hun. Moszkva sétány). The recently beautified section of the riverbank on the Pest side of the river was named after the Russian capital in 2016[7]. The decision was narrated in the press as a symbolic reparation, a gesture towards Russia, which was opposed when in 2011 the Moscow square – one of the major hubs of the city – was renamed, following a public appeal of residents[8].

Summing up, the mini-statue of Putin fulfills the definition of a counter-monument, which '[I]nstead of presenting a simple story of triumph or martyrdom, confronts the nation-state with its own crimes and exclusions" (Strakosch, 2010: 268). In my view, not only Russia, but Hungary as well, is a target of the counter-monument. While streets have been renamed (among others) in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Albania, and Czechia commemorating Ukraine, in Poland blue and yellow signs are popping up in official buildings, public spaces, shops, and private balconies as signs of solidarity (Figures 12-13), the landscape in Hungary in mid-March was overwhelmed with the placards and billboards broadcasting the messages of the government and the Fidesz party.

6   https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/25/ukraine-soldiers-told-russians-to-go-fuck-yourself-before-black-sea-island-death

7   https://index.hu/belfold/budapest/2016/08/25/moszkva_ter_helyett_johet_a_moszkva_setany/

8   http://nol.hu/belfold/moszkvarol-neveznek-el-egy-setanyt-a-pesti-duna-parton-1629871

Figure 12, 13: Billboards of a government (top) and a local initiative (bottom) helping Ukrainian refugees in Opole.

Author's photo

The civil help centers were wiped out from the train stations, but the various guerrilla actions, like the mini statue of Putin, graffities (Figure 14) or protests organized by civils reminds of the war in Ukraine, the eastern neighbouring country of Hungary. Nevertheless, these actions not only condemn Russia, but protest against the complicity of the Hungarian government as well.

Figure 14: Graffiti in Budapest.

Photo: Wojciech Opioła

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