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PANEL BK9 *New Perspectives to Migrations From, Towards/Trough, and Within Yugoslavia*

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TITLE: *On the Nationalism of the Gastarbajteri*

Abstract

The paper explores approaches to identities and politics of the (post)Yugoslav labor migrants in the German-speaking countries. I am interested in stereotypical media portrayals of *gastarbajteri* (Gastarbeiter – Ger.pl. guest workers) as inherently nationalist and frequently chauvinist political groups. This relationship can be explained through the Yugoslav state's politics towards *gastarbajteri* and labor migrants' involvement with nationalist politics during and after the Yugoslav dissolution. The socialist state was heavily invested in the support, protection, and ideological control of labor migrants. During and after the Yugoslav dissolution, the successor states made a radical shift toward ethnically defined diaspora politics, through which they fund research concerning their citizens abroad. This trend projected ethnic politics onto labor migrants. The result of the shift is continuous reporting on post-Yugoslav guest workers, by both academics and media, as identity-based groups abroad fighting to preserve their heritage, and often hard-core nationalist politics. I challenge this portrayal by insisting on a substantial difference between formal and informal levels. The paper identifies this blind spot by addressing the relationship between class and ethnicity of the labor migrants in the theoretical contributions of academics from receiving and sending societies. Can post-Yugoslav labor migration be understood through ethno-politics, or do informal social structures built during Yugoslavia remain relevant to an extent? The labor migrants may be identifying primary ethnically but have ways of interacting and relating to the other post-Yugoslavs that involve sophisticated strategies of inclusion/exclusion across the new ethnically defined borders.

Key words: stereotyping, labor migrants, diaspora, nationalism, Yugoslavia

1. Introduction

In reports on the major sporting events involving matches between the national teams of the former Yugoslavia, international media love to emphasize patriotism and violence by the respective diaspora groups. From more conventional violence between football fans, such as the clash in Vienna's neighborhood of Ottakring during the 2014 World Cup in football¹ to more unexpected clashes of tennis fans in Australia,² reporters use the diaspora as a caricature and a metaphor. The violence among the diaspora signifies the alleged unfinished conflict between the successor states. Through this simplistic reporting, migrant groups, and their region of origin, remain stereotyped as irrational, primitive, with banal affection for the nation.

Nevertheless, regional media do not go further either. Media outlets from former Yugoslavia accuse *gastarbajteri*, or Yugoslav labor migrants, of nationalism and blind loyalty to conservative politics, implicitly blocking the progress in the region. A poignant example was the reporting by popular Croatian television *Nova TV* after general elections in 2016. The election resulted in the Croatian Social-Democratic Party (SDP) losing power to rival conservatives (Croatian Democratic Union - HDZ). The day after the election result, Nova TV journalist Barbara Golja looked for the answer for the electoral loss in the villages of Cista Provo and Loveć, where support for the HDZ among the strongest in the country.³ The villages and surrounding area of Imotska Krajina have a large migrant community in Frankfurt am Main and other German cities. The report featured interview pieces with the locals ranting irrationally against the social-democratic liberal and leftist politics. Many of the interviewed were not presented with a name. Those who were, such as the two men sitting in a local café, were identified with their first names only, Ivan and Jure. Instead of the last names, there was undersigning "*Njemačka*" (Germany), alleging an explanation of their political choices. The report was later criticized for low standards of journalism, unethical conduct, and stereotyped presentation.⁴ As with their international counterparts, local media portray the diaspora groups in a negative light, feeding the image of the region as a land of internal conflict. In the case of

¹ Knittelfelder, Klaus, "Der Balkankrieg an der Ottakringer Straße," *Neue*, October 17, 2014. Accessed on March 1st, 2020. <https://www.neue.at/osterreich/2014/10/16/der-balkankrieg-an-der-ottakringerstrasse.neue>.

² Connolley, Ellen, "Balkan Fans Riot at Australian Open Tennis," *The Guardian*, January 24, 2009. Accessed on March 1st, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jan/24/australian-open-riot>.

³ "Provjereno," Nova TV, Zagreb, Croatia, September 16, 2016, reported by Barbara Golja.

⁴ Ante Radić, "Parada Predrasuda: Novinarstvo Vrijedno Prijezira," *Lupiga.Com*, September 20, 2016. Accessed March 1, 2020. <https://www.lupiga.com/vijesti/parada-predrasuda-novinarstvo-vrijedno-prijezira>.

the local media, they also directly identify *gastarbajteri* as a source of instability and obstacles in conflict resolution.

Those that *gastarbajteri* refers to, the labor migrants and their descendants, rarely use the term. In the German language, its use has been largely abandoned due to the negative connotation related to xenophobia in host societies and the idea that the guest workers were temporary staff of the society, implying their departure after their work was over. As the integration politics of Germany, Austria, and Switzerland shifted towards broader integration, the term becomes less acceptable.

In Bosnian/Croatian/Montenegrin/Serbian language(s) (BCMS) it is different. In a formal context, the term was replaced a plethora of the new concepts: “our people abroad,” “diaspora,” and “minority,” reflecting the change in politics and understanding of the state. The following terms mark the move from class as a basic frame in understanding and constructing labor migration to ethnicity. The term is still broadly used in vernacular, informal language and is therefore present in social media and tabloids. *Gastarbajter* is a frequent motif for alternative music performers mocking the migrants’ conspicuous consumption and prominent national identity.⁵ It is a frequent theme of popular jokes or advertisements depicting labor migrants as big spenders with low culture. Even though the term originates in the German language, where it is avoided, in this text, I will use transliteration in BCMS due to the larger frequency of usage and changing cultural context.

2. Socialist workers in the West

The formal history of Yugoslav labor migration dates to the 1960s, with bilateral agreements between Yugoslavia and Western European countries.⁶ The first agreements were signed with Austria, France, and Sweden (1965) to be followed by West Germany in 1968,⁷ the largest receiving society for Yugoslav migrants. These agreements ended small-scale illegal

⁵ The examples include Serbian rock band Riblja Čorba, song “Gastarbajterska” recorded in 1996, from the album *1994-2004*; Serbian punk band Pero Defformero's song “Gastarbajter” from the 2014 album *Jer To Liči Na Taj Način?* and Croatian hip-hop artist Ante Cash's song “Danke Deutschland” from the 2014 album *Zločko, a ne zločinac*.

⁶ Ulf Brunnbauer, ed., *Transnational Societies, Transterritorial Politics: Migrations in the (Post-) Yugoslav Region, 19th-21st Century*, (München: R. Oldenbourg, 2009).

⁷ Vladimir Ivanović, *Geburtstag Pišeš Normalno. Jugoslavenski Gastarbajteri u SR Nemačkoj i Austriji 1965.-1973.*, (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2012).

emigration from the end of World War Two, but they were to an extent, a continuation of the movement of the people within the empires, primarily the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Yugoslav migration to Western Europe was unique due to the involvement of the state in the life of communities. Even though this move was just a part of the broader flow of labor force from the European south to more developed north, Yugoslavia was the only socialist state among the ranks of Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece, and Turkey, the most prominent sending states. Yugoslavia took an active role within the receiving societies, monitoring health and social security, and involving itself in the education of migrants' children and the cultural life of the Yugoslav workers.

The protection of citizens from abuse in the capitalist economy was also a frame for the state to remain invested in protecting its citizens from potential ideological threats of Western consumerism, capitalism, and liberal democracy. Through migrant clubs, the state was able to keep "in line with the official Yugoslav ideological tenets"⁸. The hybrid relationship with host states involved support of the workers through clubs, supplementary education for the kids, health, pensions, social security, and advisory roles in housing. The result was a relatively stable state-sponsored infrastructure for the migrant communities.

The trauma of early departure portrayed in movies of Krsto Papić⁹ remains a focal point in the cultural memory of the highly mobile communities. Internally, the participation in labor agreements with Western European states was an embarrassment for Yugoslavia – evidence that it was unable to provide employment for all its citizens. Disillusioned workers abroad were potential prey to the existing networks of political émigrés, Croatian, Serbian, and other nationalists.

Following their victory in World War Two, the communists were quick to neutralize the non-socialist political options. Defeated forces rapidly left the country. The emigres' networks established from the end of the war until the arrival of the labor migrants in the mid-1960s combined royalists, nationalists, covert fascists and occupier collaborators, and some newly disappointed socialists.

⁸ Nikola Baković, "Tending the 'oasis of socialism.' Transnational political mobilization of Yugoslav economic emigrants in the FR Germany in the late 1960s and 1970s." *Nationalities Papers* 42, no 4 (2014): 674. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2014.880831>.

⁹ *Halo, München*, directed by Krsto Papić (Yugoslavia: Zagreb film, 1968), 13 min, available as Youtube video, posted by "Mario Gaborevic," June 1, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S2ZB5tVgwfo>.

Specijalni vlakovi. directed by Krsto Papić (Yugoslavia: Zagreb film, 1972), 16 min, available as Youtube video, posted by "Pavle Jurišić Šturm," September 12, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQWPnla6kH0>.

These networks were instrumental in organizing terrorist attacks against Yugoslavia. Such was the attack of the Bugojno group (*Bugojnska skupina*) in 1972, which took place on the territory of Yugoslavia but was organized in West Germany and Austria. Discovery of the terrorist network organizing and smuggling people and weapons through migrant networks of Germany and Austria, causing a major diplomatic scandal. The state was additionally motivated to support the workers with infrastructure as a means of monitoring communication between labor communities and these networks. The social and cultural life of the Yugoslav labor migrants abroad for the state was a point of fear and intense control.

3. Losing Yugoslavia while abroad

The web of clubs and the institutions supporting the migrant communities abroad collapsed parallel to the disintegration of the state. During the last few years of Yugoslavia, the migrant associations fragmented along ethnic lines. Increasingly disillusioned with Yugoslavism, Croats, Slovenes, and Macedonians and Bosnians later, were abandoning the clubs and finding their own. The remaining Serbian and Montenegrin population monopolized the shrinking network of clubs continuing the politics of Yugoslav dissolution abroad. The function of the clubs changed too. An instrument of the state support and monitoring the citizens abroad, the clubs shifted towards the fragmented migrants' groups worryingly looking for their new homelands in the sending region.

The image of *gastarbajteri* as politically nationalist is fixated robustly on political and military mobilizations of the diaspora groups in the wars of Yugoslav succession. Newly regrouped diaspora turned towards collecting humanitarian aid for their compatriots in war-torn Croatia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina and Kosovo, and supporting refugees throughout the region. War volunteers, mainly, though not exclusively young men from the diaspora, saw this as an opportunity to demonstrate their patriotism by conscripting in defending new homelands. The early years of war in Croatia (1991-1995) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995) featured images of *gastarbajteri* returning as war volunteers (*dobrovoljci-dragovoljci*).

Their presence was tainted by the return and involvement of criminals who abandoned Yugoslavia earlier and now saw an opportunity to redeem and demonstrate their patriotism. Such was the involvement of Željko Ražnjatović Arkan, the leader of the so-called Serb Volunteer Guard (aka "Arkanovi tigrovi"). Ražnjatović was a professional criminal and secret service informant before the wars. He left Yugoslavia in 1972 and was arrested at multiple points in the Netherlands, West Germany, and Switzerland. His involvement in the wars was

followed by prominent pillaging operations and war crimes accusations. Diaspora based war volunteers turned criminals such as Ražnjatović exemplify the superficial connection of *gastarbajteri* and instability in the region.

The prominent examples do not explain the communities at large as most members went on with their lives in the host societies participating in the wars of succession only indirectly. The groups were instrumental in organizing funds from abroad, mostly humanitarian, and providing an initial support network for the refugees arriving in Western Europe. As the number of refugees increased throughout the war, so did the dynamics of intra-Yugoslav relationships. As a rule, the refugees were more educated, learned local languages more quickly, and had more substantial social mobility than the *gastarbajteri*. Due to different integration policies between individual western European countries, most of the refugees settled in Germany returned to the region or migrated further. Those settled in Switzerland, Austria, or Scandinavian countries remained. Faster social mobility of the refugees created conflicting class dynamics between the two groups.

In newly redefined migrant communities of the 1990s, it was easier to be a Serbian or Croatian nationalist than to be a *gastrabjter*. The succession wars ceased labor migration. Those individuals that created their lives in receiving societies started understanding that the alleged return to the sending communities would not happen. “Guests” transformed into minorities.

Gastarbajteri had been a Yugoslav transnational working-class, sent from a purportedly classless society to be employed as manual laborers in capitalist economies. Upon arrival, they were positioned with or below the existing working classes of the receiving societies. The situation of perceived in-betweenness meant an inability to make a permanent home in the sending or receiving society. It also meant decreased social mobility, despite increasing economic capital and conspicuous consumption. This marginality was particularly hard to articulate in Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav societies.

The emphasis of *gastarbajteri* nationalist sentiments is closely related to the other class-based myths that operate in post-Yugoslav societies. These myths revolve around the idea that working-class people are more susceptible to nationalism or other forms of populist engagement due to lower education levels. Their (alleged) political vulnerability is in contrast to the cosmopolitan openness of the elites. It is a new nationalist elite and emerging post-socialist middle class who benefit from nationalist mobilizations and who allow themselves to transgress the ethnonational boundaries when they see it to be convenient. It is due to these

dynamics that the example mentioned above, football and other diaspora violence, needs to be taken with reservation.

4. Time to end the stereotype

The post-Yugoslav migrant groups today operate in a plurality of life choices and politics. In addition to those individuals that successfully regrouped along ethnic lines in the late 1980s and the early 1990s and maintain tight connections with sending communities, there are prominent examples of those who opted for more integration. Individuals and whole families abandoned the Yugoslav/ethnic framework for more reliable integration, hoping to blend in better with the mainstream of the receiving society. Some individuals successfully function in-between. Therefore, it is hard to make any more profound generalizations on groupings or even analytical categories describing those related to the region of former Yugoslavia who live abroad. The problem with following and understanding this plurality is that the current state defined frameworks foresee only the politics of sending or receiving, without more flexibility. The redistribution of the post-Yugoslav migrants goes beyond the debate of “nationalism versus openness”. Complex relationships of labor migrants’ belonging and reductive attitudes from the sending region are still related to class and unresolved relationships towards it in the post-socialist context. It is due to this relationship that *gastarbajteri* are automatically recognized as nationalists, without being asked how they feel or think. The underlying logic of such views is that the working-class population is more prone to support conservative politics.

Diaspora communities keep proving differently. Somewhat a working-class heroine, Austrian-Bosnian-Serbian singer Minela Stojaković became an infamous example of this relationship for her debut single “Ti propadas” (“You are falling apart”) (2006). The song was widely ridiculed for its simplistic lyrics and unusual combination of neofolk musical style associated with rural demographics and somewhat urban topics of drug usage and short-lived romantic relationships. Those who ridiculed Stojaković saw themselves as urban progressives and her as a typical *gastarbajter*, with poor taste and embarrassingly backward.

Stojaković’s politics was much more progressive than the region. At the time of the song, she worked in migrant clubs and bars in Wels, Austria, travelled all around former Yugoslavia and maneuvered between the Austrian and diaspora spaces with ease. An important feature of early Facebook, her religious status, stated, “Orthodox Christian featuring Muslim.” Stojaković demonstrated new possibilities of post-Yugoslav sociability abroad that transcend ethnicity, class, or integration.

Changing conditions of the migrations render weaker ethnic identification and its meanings in either conceptualization of belonging or practices of socialization. With Slovenia and Croatia joining the European Union and Germany being expected to further open its labor market to the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, the current volume of migration is approaching those of the early *gastarbajteri*. Nevertheless, the experience of labor migrants today differs from the trailblazers of the 1960s, due to structural conditions and changing class dynamics.

Regional enthusiasm for newly formed nation-states in the 1990s was replaced by the disappointment with post-socialist transition and unfulfilled expectations from the EU accession process. This disappointment fuels new waves of migration from the region. This migration is not founded on an idea of return, as it was a case with *gastarbajteri* or refugees. It is mostly seen as permanent re-settlement. The integration politics of the European states changed, allowing space between assimilation, integration, and identity perseverance through a complicating understanding of the integration process.

Despite the current crisis in movement, labor, and migration regimes caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the regimes of communication and transport are radically transforming migrants' geographies. Cultural distances change as the individual users both in sending and receiving societies consume media products in fragmented, transnational arrangements supported with a never ceasing social media and messaging presence. Users choose what to consume independently of media editors, and they can share it with their friends and family regardless of physical distance. Wherever they go, today's migrants never really leave. They explore daily shifts in their identities as they navigate between different private and public spaces.

In fragmented transnational mediascape and communication channels, the proximity of languages becomes a more critical dimension than identity politics. Social media networks popular among migrant communities are rich with examples of the same posts, advertisements, and services shared in ethnically defined and all-Yugoslav groups. An interesting example is a business portal in Switzerland, www.pecenje.ch, which gathers information on the popular regional delicacy – spit roast meat. Loved across the Balkan Peninsula, it is somewhat challenging to prepare since the recipe involves roasting the entire animal. In the Swiss case, the portal www.pecenje.ch provides quick information about nearby businesses that offer the service across the Swiss Federation, and it involves ethnic Serbians, Bosniaks, Hungarians, and Croats. The information on the website is delivered in a mix of BCMS standards. The example cannot be generalized for anything more than that some individuals love this delicacy, but it is

indicative of dynamics in the post-Yugoslav ethnic relations which remain obscured by the perpetuation of *gastarbajteri* nationalism by those who write about them.

The post-Yugoslav connections abroad transcend consumer goods from the region present in specialized shops. In everyday lives, individuals from the former Yugoslavia heterogeneously choose between participating in the host society, their ethnically defined groups, post-Yugoslav groups, or broader migrant networks. The more migrant communities feel integrated but free from pressure to assimilate, the easier it is to explore their positions on of in-betweenness. Today there are too many nationalisms in play for *gastarbajteri* to be labeled as nationalists only.

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