

Hidden labor: Albanian migration in late-socialist Croatia

by Rory Archer

This article explores the phenomenon of intra-Yugoslav Albanian migration to Croatia during late socialism. By the 1970s and 1980s Albanians from Kosovo and Macedonia were among the most prominent labor migrants to the northwest of the country. Most Albanian migrants were engaged in private business which while legal, was anathema according to Yugoslav socialist modernity and meant that their activities took place largely without the supervision of the party-state. Albanians were viewed by the Croatian authorities as a potential security threat because of political stirrings in Kosovo in the 1980s. Furthermore they encountered prejudice from the population in the areas to which they moved. The Croatian archival documents referred to in this text depict Albanians as simultaneously being of great economic means (buying large houses and business spaces through family networks, funded by smuggling and other illicit activities) but also as socially marginal (undertaking poorly paid physical labor and informal jobs due to economic necessity). By the end of socialism the political interests of Albanians in Croatia and Croats themselves began to align however. The research is supported by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) project “To the Northwest! Intra-Yugoslav Albanian migration (1953-1989)” (grant number P 32345).

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Scholarship on Yugoslav migration has tended to respond to the phenomena of “*Gastarbeiter*” migration to Western European liberal democracies from the 1960s onwards, war-time refugee movements of the 1990s, and more recently, on post-socialist, post-war migrations conceptualized around the “Yugosphere”. A largely separate body of scholarship has tackled Albanian migration in the postsocialist era from Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia to countries like Greece, Italy and Switzerland. Indeed, Russel King has described Albania as having become a “laboratory” for the study of migration and development.¹ Missing in the literature, however, is the study of Albanian migration *within* Yugoslavia. I suggest in this short text that Albanian migration to late-socialist Croatia, while relatively small in scale, is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, most Albanians were engaged in private business which while legal, was anathema according to Yugoslav socialist modernity and meant that their activities took place largely without the supervision of the party-state. Secondly, Albanians were viewed

by the authorities as a potential security threat because of political stirrings in Kosovo in the 1980s. Thirdly, Albanians in Croatia encountered prejudice from the population in the areas to which they moved. The archival documents referred to in this text depicts Albanians as simultaneously of great economic means – buying large houses and business spaces through family networks, funded by smuggling and other illicit activities – but also as socially marginal – undertaking poorly paid physical labor and informal jobs due to economic necessity. Ultimately, by the end of socialism and the collapse of the common Yugoslav state in 1991, the political interests of Albanians in Croatia and Croats themselves began to align. With the transformation to capitalism and war of independence pitting Croats against Serbs, Albanians improved their position and now enjoy comprehensive minority rights in the most recent EU member state.

Tim Judah, in his treatise on the Yugosphere, points out that the Yugosphere “by no means contradicts the existence of both national spheres within it, a Serbian sphere, a Croatian sphere and so on, but also, again as in Venn diagrams, an Albanian sphere, which is partly within it and partly outside.”² Albanians as the largest non-Slavic population in Yugoslavia, reached up to 8 per cent of the population by the 1980s. By the breakup of the common state in 1991, Albanians outnumbered Slovenes, Macedonians and perhaps also Muslims/Bosniaks to become the third largest national group (behind Serbs and Croats) in the state. (I write “likely” as most Albanians boycotted the 1991 census). Predominantly rural in origin, Albanian labor migrants gravitated to industrial centers around the country in search of work, particularly from the early 1950s when a liberalisation of residence registration coincided with industrial expansion across Yugoslavia and nascent tourism along the Adriatic coast. Albanian labor migration to economically developed parts of Yugoslavia (the northwest republics of Slovenia and Croatia) overlapped with Albanian participation in “*Gastarbeiter*” migration to Western European countries from the 1960s.

Widespread anti-Albanian attitudes were salient in Yugoslavia and were not only the preserve of nationalist Serbs. During socialism, Croats, Slovenes other Yugoslavs sometimes viewed Albanians with suspicion, subjecting them to practices of Othering that resembled Western European cultural racism. As Catherine Baker observes, the intersection of religion, ethnicity and social class for Albanians in late 1980s Yugoslavia rendered them “simultaneously labelled as fundamentalist Muslims in Serb nationalist media and treated as a semi-racialized, culturally and ethnically distinct underclass in Slovenia and Croatia.”³ Sources of distrust and even outright hostility towards Albanians in Yugoslavia stemmed from several interrelated factors. These include purported Albanian loyalty to the external homeland of Enver Hoxha’s Albania (often presented as an enemy state of Yugoslavia), linguistic and cultural isolation of Albanians in relation to other Yugoslav peoples, Christian animosity towards a largely Islamic group, and a

distrust of rural homesteads and patriarchal kinship patterns according to socialist morality.

With the official Yugoslav interpretation that the 1981 demonstrations in Kosovo were “counterrevolutionary” and an illegitimate expression of nationalist excesses, anti-Albanian sentiment across the country grew and security services followed the activities of potential “irredentists” closely. Several state-wide security operations tackled nationalist Albanian groups during the 1980s focusing on Yugoslav-based illegal movements and Albanian émigrés in Western Europe and North America who had (alleged) links to the Peoples Republic of Albania and other anti-Yugoslav émigré organizations, namely Croatian ultra-nationalists and fascists. Croatia, and in particular the north-western areas of the socialist republic (the regions of Istria and Kvarner), was a particularly important location for both Albanian intra-Yugoslav migrants drawn to the area to due favorable economic conditions (tourism, industry), and connections with Albanian transnational networks in Western Europe. The proximity to borders with Italy and Austria rendered the region a prominent node in the transnational network of Albanians who would typically maintain a presence in their homesteads in Kosovo and Macedonia, establish a business and home in Istria or Kvarner, and have links to kin in Western Europe (who in turn would frequent the north-west Adriatic and serve as a source of capital for business and property investments).

A 1988 report from the State security forces Pula branch detailed the “security situation in the area of Pula relating to the Albanian Complex” (the term *Complex* in the title is suggestive that *all* Albanians were seen as a potential security risk).⁴ It describes how in the 1981 census only 768 individuals declared themselves as Albanian in Istria but that the number was certainly far larger due to undeclared workers, particularly those casually employed in the private sector on a seasonal basis. According to the authorities in Pula, Poreč and elsewhere in the region, the 1981 demonstrations in Kosovo led to an increase in the number of Albanians with estimates that at least 2,500 Albanians were living in the area and that number would increase during the tourist season with unregistered individuals coming to work in the private businesses of relatives. Other reports provided even higher estimates. In Pula town by 1988 allegedly there were 1,795 permanent Albanian residents and 1,547 temporary residents registered but the authorities believed that their total number was significantly higher considering that many did not register their presence.

Most Albanian migrants to Northwest Croatia found employment in a growing number of private businesses in hospitality and crafts. In particular, goldsmiths and ice-cream parlors are mentioned as are sellers of fruit and vegetables and informal work in construction. In Istria, authorities reported: “Most members of the Albanian nationality work in particular areas outside the social sector. According to our operative estimates, 90 percent of the nationality is either in

possession of a private business or is employed in one.” Even though Yugoslavia’s liberal interpretation of state socialism permitted private business, the presence of a particular population – in this case Croatia’s Albanians – so prominently involved in economic activity outside of the social sector (the equivalent of the state sector in other communist counties) was a source of suspicion. Local authorities made a direct link between the suspect category of private business owners and (alleged) networks of Albanian nationalists and more general criminality including cross-border smuggling from Italy. In Poreč

We have information, though it is difficult to prove, that they abuse private workspaces wherever it is possible, they are prepared and do not chose the method and means by which they achieve their goal. This can be giving bribes, selling hard currency, smuggling and connections to the extreme émigré groups.

Security services in Pula reported:

The most interesting group are those owners of private businesses (ice-cream parlors, jewelers) due to their exceptionally high material status. It is indisputable that such a status is partly the consequence of one’s own work in combination with favorable conditions of a touristic region which enables the gaining of an enviable financial result. However, information received also suggests that a meaningful number of Albanian owners of private businesses gain huge earnings on the basis of malversations, illegal currency exchange, bypassing regulations and especially through smuggling.

Municipal authorities in the nearby municipality of Buje similarly stressed the alleged connection between Albanians, private business and criminality:

A number of members of the Albanian nationality is prone to bribes and corruption. Here especially to be mentioned are owners of craft and hospitality businesses.... Most often they are inclined to giving bribes and goods and money, through small gifts to inspection, administrative and other authorities. Everyone is overwhelmingly more inclined towards illegal trade [...] Most often, they engage in illegal trade between Italy and Yugoslavia in goods like household machines, musical and other instruments, goods lacking on our market.

The report claims that the H. brothers are seen as the leaders of the Albanian community in the area by fellow Albanians. The security services believed the three brothers were involved in the international drug trade noting that they travelled to Western Europe, the Middle East, USA and Latin America. As well as owning a huge house in the area, they kept multiple hospitality and pastry businesses along the Slovenian and Croatian coast, multiple family homes across Yugoslavia, and “possibly two flats in Istanbul.”

Municipal authorities and security forces regarded Albanians as insular and noted that since the “outbreak of the counterrevolution in Kosovo” informal but suspicious gatherings of Albanians in Istria were observed by security services. Albanians were allegedly exchanging their views, commenting to one another

about the situation and “distancing themselves from the non-Albanian population”. Individual cases of overt Albanian nationalism were also reported, including support for the Kelmendi, the Albanian recruit who had killed his fellow soldiers in the Paraćin army barracks in 1987. Local authorities in Northwest Croatia did not consider anti-Albanian sentiment to be a meaningful problem however. In Buje, authorities “did not register a single case which would indicate that pressure was put upon Albanians, nor were any attacks or destruction of property reported”. In Pula during 1987, authorities did not register a single case suggesting “pressure against, or attacks upon” Albanians in the area but four cases of property damage to Albanian businesses were reported. While the culprits were not identified, the security services in Pula assumed this to be “the consequence of their interpersonal clashes”. However, the report did state negative views of Istrian inhabitants towards Albanians:

Various comments and revolts from the non-Albanian population relating to the dominant characteristic of the behavior of members of the Albanian community are present. They relate to the intensive buying of property, regardless of the price and enormous enrichment.

Two contradictory stereotypes of Albanians seemed to emerge in parallel. On the one hand there was an influx of unskilled workers “taking the hardest jobs (digging canals, collecting rubbish, physical work...)”. They were seen as cultural outsiders, socially and politically disconnected to the area they moved to and largely invisible in public life and usually undocumented. On the other hand, there was also a stereotype of shrewd, very wealthy Albanians who helped one another advance in private businesses and property speculation and maintained strong links with both emigre groups in Western Europe and their extended kin-networks in Kosovo and Macedonia whose mobility and wealth were a source of suspicion.

Despite the evident cultural racism and animosity towards Albanians in the Yugoslav Northwest, sources of solidarity and an alignment of political interests also existed between Yugoslavia’s Albanians and sections of Croatian (and Slovenian) society, particularly in the late 1980s given the growing fear of Serb hegemony. While the hitherto focus has been on the difficulties of migration and participation in public life for Albanians in Croatia, there were, of course, factors which facilitated their mobility and helped many to thrive in the Yugoslav Northwest. First and foremost a common Yugoslav state framework, the ideology of brotherhood and unity, and some degree of cultural familiarity could help undergird Albanian migrants in Croatia.

Parallel to negative accounts of Albanian migrants, more positive perspectives also circulated. For example, the Sunday edition of Dalmatia’s major newspaper, *Nedeljna Dalmacija*, provided a series of detailed and generally sympathetic accounts of Albanians in Dalmatia in the late 1980s, albeit from the perspective

of an outsider's gaze upon an exoticized group that needed to be discovered and explained to the readership. (The title of the feuilleton ran "Albanians in Dalmatia: What they work at and how they live").⁵ The series of articles stressed the internal heterogeneity of Albanians in Croatia noting divisions between Catholics and Muslims, those of a more Turkish orientation and others with a more explicitly Albanian outlook as well as professional networks – communities of jewelers, bakers, construction workers and so forth. Rather than interpreting the lack of interest in participation in self-management and the party-state as a priori negative and evidence of potential subversion, the series gave voice to Albanians like Pavle Paljusi, a second generation jeweler who stated "We are interested in who will have more money, we are interested in economics and not politics." Thus newspaper reports stressed a combination of entrepreneurial and patriarchal values almost as a badge of honor and evidence of self-help:

Albanians, both Catholics and Muslims equally, are not inclined to seek help from society, particularly not in financial affairs and they have a developed system of credit and loans in which there do not exist interest but the obligation rules to spend the funds wisely and in a suitable way return it.

Interviews in *Nedjeljna Dalmacija* provide a rare insight into the views of young Albanians on the Adriatic coast. In many cases respondents are positive and affirm their experience in the area. Riza Haliti, a 21-year-old respondent in the interview claimed to have tried to seek work everywhere across the country and claims that Dalmatia is the best place for Albanians in Yugoslavia:

You know in Slovenia ... yes there are better wages, but they look at you like you are infections [zaražen]. In Belgrade and Niš the pay is weaker, and someone always provokes you and looks at you strangely. We are at peace only here [in Croatia], even with the police with whom I really have no problems.

For others, Croatia was a steppingstone to capitalist Western Europe. An anonymous worker at the green market in Split described how he had no interest in "keeping to traditions" and returning to Kosovo, but neither did he wish to remain in Croatia. His plan was to depart for Western European country whenever possible and was saving and attempting to arrange paperwork. "We all say that we are getting on well here. And that is true. But listen, here I am still a foreigner. I just work and sleep. In some foreign country it cannot be any different, but I would be able to earn a lot more."

About the author

Rory Archer is a social historian of 20th century Southeast Europe working at the University of Konstanz, Germany, and the University of Graz, Austria. His research has focused on labor history and gender history in socialism, housing, everyday life and popular culture. Recent publications include “New perspectives on East European Labor History: an Introduction”, *Labor: Studies in Working Class History* (forthcoming 2020, co-authored and coedited with Goran Musić) and “‘Antibureaucratism’ as a Yugoslav Phenomenon: The View from northwest Croatia”, *Nationalities Papers* 47:4 (2019): 562-580 <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2018.40>

Endnotes

- 1 King, Russell. "Albania as a Laboratory for the Study of Migration and Development." *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans* 7 no. 2 (2005): 133-55.
- 2 Judah, Tim. "Yugoslavia is dead: long live the Yugosphere". *LSEE Papers*, 2009. p. 21 [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/48041/1/_Libfile_repository_Content_LSEE_Papers%20on%20South%20Eastern%20Europe_Yugoslavia%20is%20Dead\(author\).pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/48041/1/_Libfile_repository_Content_LSEE_Papers%20on%20South%20Eastern%20Europe_Yugoslavia%20is%20Dead(author).pdf)
- 3 Baker, Catherine. *Race and the Yugoslav Region: Postsocialist, Post-conflict, Postcolonial?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018) 72.
- 4 All archival documents cited are located in the Croatian State Archives, Zagreb (in the fond: HR HDA 1561, SDS RSUP SRH).
- 5 *Nedjeljna Dalmacija* (Split, 27.11.1988, broj 917).