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Yugoslavia is (not) a Refugee Country? Refugees between Transit and Integration in an Ever-Changing Socialist State

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Abstract

Throughout the Cold War, Yugoslavia was the only socialist country that participated in the Western-led international refugee regime and acted as a transit zone for refugees hoping to reach the Western Bloc. Those transiting were mainly, but not exclusively, escapees from various countries in the Soviet bloc. A few refugee groups also settled in Yugoslavia against the backdrop of shifts in international constellations, tense relationships with neighboring countries, and transnational mobilizations. This article will first investigate the dichotomy between transit and the few instances of refugees integrating into socialist Yugoslavia. Next, it will investigate the ease of the resettlement process by exploring how the length of time spent in the country was influenced by hierarchies among different refugee groups based on ethnic origin, political allegiances, class, and which opportunities for resettlement were available to whom. Finally, it will reflect on how the changing role of temporary refuge or permanent haven that Yugoslavia ascribed to itself was constructed and challenged by the host society, potential countries of resettlement, and the refugees themselves.

Keywords: Southeastern Europe; refugees; migration; Cold War; transit

“Yugoslavia is (not) a refugee country,” the title of an article published in the Belgrade-based magazine *Intervju* on March 3, 1989, bluntly stated. By playing with brackets, the title unveiled the ambivalent role that Yugoslavia happened to play toward refugees. The country was described as a “large waiting room” in which “refugees from all over the world come” and where “the flow of the poor South towards the rich North, and the agitated East towards the calm West” had become enmeshed.¹ Despite being one of the signatories of the 1951 Convention on the status of refugees and hosting a UNHCR office, in the late 1980s, Yugoslavia found itself in the position of being—unwillingly—a transit country for thousands of asylum seekers annually, but it allowed almost no refugees to remain. Its steady commitment to not hosting refugees was bolstered by its unenviable economic situation, which made it unattractive to foreigners looking for economic opportunities abroad. Within a few years, the Yugoslav Federation would dissolve in a bloody war and the entire region would become the largest producer of refugees in Europe since the Second World War. Retrospectively, it might not sound unexpected that Yugoslavia was not able to provide a haven for individuals fleeing their countries. Nevertheless, this position was in fact the result of developments that had unfolded throughout the postwar decades.

Using archival materials predominantly from post-Yugoslav and UNHCR archives, the article explores socialist Yugoslavia’s refugee policies throughout its existence. In particular it will look at the elements that made Yugoslavia alternately a country of transit or of integration. The first section focuses on the watershed in refugee policies marked by the 1948 split with the Soviet Union,

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and the second section highlights the international dimension that refugee issues acquired through Yugoslavia's cooperation with the UNHCR and how, until the early 1950s, Yugoslavia advertised the supposed integration of refugees within its labor market as a mark of its system's success. The third section shows that playing the role of transit country in 1957–1958 allowed Yugoslavia to reframe itself as a mere corridor for defectors from the Soviet Bloc, a feature that would gain momentum from the mid-1970s. The fourth section examines three integration projects, targeting Albanian, Macedonian, and Chilean refugees during the period between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s, illustrating how they responded to both domestic and international developments. The fifth section explores the role of resettlement opportunities in amplifying hierarchies between national groups, a feature that would escalate in the 1980s. The sixth section turns to the period leading up to the dissolution of Yugoslavia, looking at how intra-Yugoslav conflicts made ethnicity a central question in any integration project.

While examining refugee policies diachronically, this article will posit some broader questions: How were the concepts of “transit” and “integration” constructed, made, and unmade by state actors (primarily Yugoslavia, but also other states)? What geopolitical and domestic factors contributed to shaping the Yugoslav position? What room was there to maneuver for refugees whose plans, futures, and aspirations were at stake?

Although refugee studies have investigated the process of labeling refugees, scholars have so far hesitated in engaging with the categories that states ascribed to them or that were imposed on them from outside (Zetter 1991). Nevertheless, the politicization of the concept of transit migration has been a topic of research. The use of this label in particular is very much connected with a new phase that began with the end of the Cold War and the European Union's efforts to externalize migration (Collyer, Düvell, and De Haas 2012; Düvell 2012), yet the notion of transit countries had already emerged during the early Cold War. As some studies have shown, at that time the label of transit country was being strategically deployed by governments in the primary countries providing temporary refuge to refugees awaiting to be resettled (Graf and Knoll 2017; Molnar 2018; Salvatici 2020).

It is certainly true that the international refugee regime put in place during the Cold War allowed for relatively smooth resettlement and made the length of the refugees' stay in transit countries relatively short when compared with the current situation. The dramatic increase in the number of refugees in the 1980s and the obvious flaws in the resettlement mechanisms were a prelude to the tightening of procedures regulating the EU's refugee-admission policies from the end of that decade. Since the establishment of the Schengen zone in Europe, the concept of a transit country has been subject to a gradual process of othering by its application mostly to non-EU states, and the term “transit migration” has become a synonym for illegal migration (Düvell 2012, 418). This was not the case during the Cold War, when transit countries were integrated within a common mechanism of resettlement.

Yet some of the elements that characterized transit countries are recurrent in different historical periods. Despite the emergence of increasingly nonlinear migration paths, with blurred boundaries between transient and permanent migration (Robertson 2019), transit countries are conspicuous spaces that intentionally produce temporariness and fluidity to avoid becoming final destinations for migrants who were originally heading somewhere else (Coddington 2020). Rather than being the result of neglect, destitution and lack of opportunities would become part of a deliberate strategy for host states to make refugees feel unwelcome.

Scholarship has shown that a binary migration system, with significant rights awarded to European refugees only, is rooted in the post-Second World War refugee regime and in the geographical limitation that circumscribed the application of the 1951 Convention to those fleeing from Europe. The cases of the two other main transit countries bordering Yugoslavia, Austria and Italy, are telling. In Austria, this affected the implementation of policies regarded as universalist. In Italy, however, which did not lift its geographical limitation until 1989, a racialized approach to refugee policy was codified by norms and obligations (Salvatici 2020; Graf 2022).

The concept of transit and that of “integration” or resettlement is multifaceted. Studies on the displaced-persons (DPs) question in the aftermath of the Second World War have shown just how politicized the very concept of “resettlement” was during the Cold War, which then became the main solution advocated by the Western Bloc to grapple with the influx of escapees from socialist countries. This was brought to the fore by the establishment of the International Refugee Organisation, whose main purpose was to resettle refugees in countries in need of labor, which were mostly located outside Europe (Marrus 2002, 344; Gatrell 2013, 111). The International Refugee Organisation was a response to the tension between the “resettlement” option and anxieties about the presence of a “surplus” population that would possibly infect locals with their idleness and apathy (Cohen 2011).

Although some humanitarian actions were foreseen for “hardcore cases”—refugees who were unable to work because of age, family status, or health reasons—most DPs were turned into labor migrants to be resettled, and they were discursively integrated into the postwar reconstruction efforts (Salomon 1991, 189). The need to endow newcomers with a sustainable position in the host society often hid disguised exploitative attitudes toward refugees (Robson 2023).

The postwar refugee regime was primarily a political project, as the goal of undermining the Soviet Bloc went hand in hand with renewed Western cooperation (Comte 2020). The suitability of each refugee group to respond to recruitment criteria became the basis for the construction of hierarchies of ethnic groups, with those deemed “good laborers” located at the top (Salvatici 2011, 211). Labor became a tool to rehabilitate refugees and prepare them for a new life in the “free world” (Salvatici 2011, 215–218; see also, Gatrell 2011). Furthermore, boundaries that were traced between different refugee groups, defining them as either integrating into the host state or awaiting to be resettled abroad, contributed to shaping the host state’s institutions and legal frameworks in ways with widespread and enduring effects, similar to the effects of criteria for accessing citizenship in postwar Italy (Ballinger 2020).

The countries of the Soviet Bloc responded to this ideological challenge by opposing the Western-based refugee regime, which was deemed a tool to exploit cheap labor, and advocating for “repatriation” of refugees to their own home countries as the only possible solution for the DP issue (Gatrell 2013, 108–110). Socialist countries, however, not only emphasized their willingness to reintegrate their citizens who had defected (with the exception of war criminals); they also allowed in a certain number of refugees claiming to be persecuted in their own countries and considered labor central to the process of integration (Tohma *forthcoming*). Yet labor was a preoccupation not only for the host states but also for refugees. Apart from ideological reasons, the search for employment was not absent in the decision-making processes of those who defected eastward, as was also the case for Eastern European refugees in the Western Bloc (Gramith 2019).

Yugoslavia is often referred to as a peculiar case study. It radically differentiated itself from the countries of the Soviet Bloc in how it managed international mobility. It was the only socialist country that built solid relationships with the UNHCR and participated in the Western-led refugee regime while also allowing its citizens to travel freely and seek employment in capitalist countries. Furthermore, Yugoslavia was internationally praised for its “open borders” policy, which resulted in a visa-free regime with many countries. Yet this coexisted with a highly securitized approach to matters of public order and interior affairs, along with tight control over border areas.

In this article, however, I would like to take this reflection beyond a specific place and time by focusing on the paired concepts of “transit” and “integration.” On one hand, they refer to opposite features—the transiency and temporariness of the refugees’ presence in a country versus a more permanent relationship to the space in question. On the other, the two terms are hardly in binary opposition. Rather, as I will attempt to demonstrate, there was fluidity between the two. External contingencies, obstacles preventing refugees from moving forward, and shifting strategies frequently turned transit into a long-term stay out of either necessity or deliberate choice. Similarly, changes in geopolitical preoccupations, newly available opportunities, and disappointment with the existing conditions could easily unmake cases of proclaimed “integration” and contribute to

compelling or convincing refugees to leave. Thus, rather than referring to immobile features, transit and integration operate in a dynamic relationship in which they are continuously reframed and reassessed. With respect to this, I will also look beyond the contingent historical example of socialist Yugoslavia.

The Mantra of Full Employment: Integration through Labor in Early Socialism

Throughout its history, Yugoslavia found itself at the intersection of different migration routes. Nevertheless, the majority of those who found refuge in the country did so in the aftermath of the Second World War and in a still war-torn country that was deeply committed to reconstruction. The most consistent group was that of refugees from the Greek Civil War. The case of Greek settlement in the Vojvodinian village of Buljkes shows that early Yugoslavia would open its doors to political fellows up to the point of allowing them to establish their own political and administrative infrastructures (Ristović 2012). Buljkes enjoyed a high degree of autonomy that resembled extra-territoriality, as shown by the rights given to refugees for their own police, currency, and laws (Ristović 2016). With the outcome of the Greek Civil War still an open question, refugees were framed as being temporarily hosted in Yugoslavia while hopefully awaiting to return home if their side emerged victorious. Despite pointing out that the majority of refugees were women, minors, and older people, at the United Nations Security Council the Yugoslav delegate emphasized that a significant number had already found employment in Yugoslav companies and farms (Ristović 2016, 391).

Refugees from the Greek Civil War were not the only ones seeking refuge in Yugoslavia. At the height of the crisis with neighboring Italy, Yugoslavia hosted former partisans and left-leaning workers from Italy who claimed to have been persecuted within the staunch anticommunist post-1947 atmosphere. In many cases, labor skills were crucial for their recruitment, as they were for the skilled workers from the Monfalcone shipyard, who moved to Yugoslavia in several waves to be employed in similar workplaces. In several instances, provisions related to pensions and their children's education suggested plans for a long-term resettlement (Gramith 2019; Miletto 2019; Abram forthcoming).

Claims of persecution were often not divorced from unemployment, and they were constantly reframed as political discrimination against communist workers. Although existing anticommunist biases were certainly present in the Italian labor market during the early Cold War, this view was used to enforce the dichotomy between two different dreamworlds. Capitalist countries were regarded as being unable to grant their citizens the right to work and were also viewed as discriminating against those regarded as the most deserving in the eyes of the socialist authorities. State socialism, on the other hand, boasted its policy of full employment. This was all reflected in the nascent Yugoslav refugee policy. In 1953, at the height of the crisis between Italy and Yugoslavia, Yugoslavia praised itself for not only hosting 156 refugees from Italy but also employing them according to their skills.²

The 1948–49 split with the Soviet Union, which heavily reframed Yugoslavia's geopolitical position, was a watershed for the refugees who were hosted in the country. Yugoslavia became an unfavorable place for orthodox communists. Roughly 4,000 Greek refugees left, mainly heading to the Eastern Bloc countries (Katsanos 2015, 111), whereas only around a hundred individuals remained in the country.³ In a climate of settling of accounts against the few Greeks who had sided with Yugoslavia, the hardline Stalinist leadership in the village of Buljkes moved the entire community to Czechoslovakia by September 1949 (Ristović 2012, 142–143; 2016, 398–399). Although ethnic Macedonian refugees from the Greek Civil War (called Aegean Macedonians) remained in the country,⁴ integration within what was deemed a kin republic was not straightforward. Many continued to regard their stay in Yugoslavia as transient, and they considered repatriation as their preferred option as soon as the normalization of the relationships between Yugoslavia and Greece would allow it (Vernant 1953).⁵ Evidence of this was their lack of interest in

acquiring Yugoslav citizenship, even though Greece had denaturalized them (Monova 2001; Limantzakis 2017, 109). As circumstances would later prove, this decision was hampered by the authorities in both states. Greece obstructed mass repatriation by pointing to an assumption that refugees in Yugoslavia had been “Macedonised.” Having similar motivations, the Macedonian authorities regarded the departure of coethnic refugees who had found refuge in their kin republic as an inconvenience (Katsanos 2015, 116–117; Mirčevska n.d.). External circumstances turned the Macedonian refugees’ stay in Yugoslavia from temporary to permanent. This step was epitomized by access to Yugoslav citizenship, a process that nonetheless was dragged out for decades.⁶ As we will see, this path would be a steep one.

However, the echo of the two Cominform resolutions against Yugoslavia resonated even further into the welcoming of fugitives from the neighboring people’s democracies with whom Yugoslavia was at loggerheads. In November 1948, the Yugoslav Ministry of Internal Affairs reported on the hundreds of refugees from Albania, Romania, and Bulgaria in the country who “were allowed to stay and work in the country according to their ability.”⁷ In the early 1950s, organizations were formed according to national belonging, with refugees coming from Albania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania. After undergoing a process to ascertain their identity, they were resettled in the sensitive areas bordering their former countries to be used to infiltrate or serve as tools for pressure. The most striking case is that of Albanian refugees, who were caught in the middle of the serpentine relations between Yugoslavia and Albania. They were allowed to resettle in the areas inhabited by the Albanian minority—in Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro—from which they could leave only with a police permit.⁸ Refugees were granted their own newspaper and, in some cases, provided with plots of land and scholarships. This went so far as the creation of a labor brigade and the formation of army units ready to be dispatched to Albania (Hrabak 1994). In the highly securitized environment that marked the aftermath of the 1948 crisis, refugees who could be exploited for intelligence purposes against the neighboring people’s democracies were awarded with a permanent place in the country.

In the gloomy post-1948 atmosphere, a dichotomy between transit and integration of refugees was already emerging. In particular, the political role ascribed to refugees determined the length of their planned stay in the country. Those who were deemed useful for Yugoslav interests—including refugees who could be used as pawns in insurrectional activities against their own countries—were encouraged or compelled to remain in the country. Conversely, refugees regarded as disloyal were initially imprisoned or kept in closed facilities to be allowed to emigrate West at a later date (Vernant 1953, 228).⁹ By 1951, thousands of refugees from the Soviet Bloc had already reached Trieste, which was under Anglo-American administration.¹⁰

Show and Reality: Refugees from the Eastern Bloc between Bilateral Relations and the International Refugee Regime

Yugoslavia, which had presented itself since the end of Second World War as one of the Soviet Union’s staunchest allies, experienced a most spectacular change in foreign policy after 1948. The split with the Soviet Union and the consequent rapprochement with the capitalist bloc led to the country’s gradual integration into the Western-led refugee regime. Starting in the early 1950s, Yugoslavia established contacts with the UNHCR; it also joined the 1951 Refugee Convention. Refugees ceased to be exclusively a matter of internal affairs, and their presence in Yugoslavia came into the international spotlight.

In August 1951, Yugoslavia, which had started recruiting skilled workers abroad after the Second World War ended (Ilić 2020), presented itself internationally as a potential country for integration, stressing its need for labor in all economic sectors—in a country where, as they argued, “there is no unemployment”—and the equality with Yugoslav citizens that refugees allegedly enjoyed.¹¹ In international gatherings, social rights such as the access to employment and accommodation were described as the core of the Yugoslav refugee policy, a view that coexisted with a restrictive approach

to individual rights demonstrated by, for example, limitations on freedom of movement.¹² Labor was both a right and a duty for every able-bodied citizen and, by extension, those who happened to be hosted by a socialist society (Magun 1996; Tohma *forthcoming*). Labor-related issues were also one of the battlefields between Eastern and Western understandings of refugee issues (Bernard 2023).

Nonetheless, the initial steps undertaken for the construction of self-managed socialism resulted in an increase in unemployment, which had already reached 6–7% by 1952 (Woodward 1995, 4). The League of the Communists' acknowledgement of unemployment in a socialist society did not initially affect the image the country had projected abroad. In the early 1950s, Yugoslavia kept to the state socialism mantra of full employment as one of its main achievements. Similarly, in international gatherings it continued endorsing a stance similar to the Soviet one by labeling the resettlement endeavors undertaken by international agencies as exploitation of the labor force.¹³

In the early 1950s, Jacques Vernant, the author of a seminal survey on refugees in the first postwar decade, described Yugoslavia's refugee policy as "liberal," stressing that refugees from neighboring countries were "encouraged to work, and are helped to find employment for which they are suited and qualified." Drawing on information provided by the Yugoslav authorities, he stated that many of them were able to find a job within a few days or at most a month after their arrival (Vernant 1953, 218–219; Skran and Daughtry 2007). Vernant, who regarded the right to work as one of the main issues for refugee management, uncritically voiced Yugoslav claims and praised the Yugoslav government for creating conditions for integrating refugees in a way that was much more effective than what was being done in Western European countries (Skran and Daughtry 2007, 28). Vernant's observations that refugees enjoyed full freedom in Yugoslavia stood in stark contrast to the securitized management and exploitation of refugees for intelligence purposes. Nevertheless, it testified to the appeal of the Yugoslav claim of providing a durable solution for refugees through labor integration. Although done at the request of the UNHCR, Vernant's report was later disclaimed as being the sole responsibility of the author.¹⁴ Yet it still became a primary source in the production of knowledge on refugees internationally.

During High Commissioner Gerrit Jan van Heuven Goedhart's 1953 visit to Yugoslavia, the meetings organized by the Yugoslav authorities emphasized that all refugees were employed according to their skills.¹⁵ Shortly after, when faced with evidence of abuses against refugees, van Heuven Goedhart reluctantly admitted in internal communications that "it might be that there are two 'situations' of refugees in Yugoslavia: a 'show' and a 'reality' of which [he] would have seen only the former."¹⁶ However, it is likely that the UNHCR hesitated to discredit the reputation of the only socialist country that had agreed to join.

Oscillating ties among Yugoslavia, neighboring countries, and international organizations marked a policy of repeated relaxation and tightening. According to the US intelligence sources, at some point the number of Westward escapes so concerned the Yugoslav government that it considered halting emigration. It was with this purpose that the Gerovo camp was created. Located in the isolated mountain area of Gorski Kotar, it became the symbol of the meagre conditions in which refugees lived and was regarded as a facility from which it was impossible to escape.¹⁷ Although Gerovo officially hosted political refugees awaiting to be accepted by a country of emigration, there are references to the Yugoslav government manipulating them further by exploiting their desire to leave. This ranged from ignoring their requests to emigrate to allowing them to establish contacts with prospective countries of emigration, which were later interrupted to convince them to give up their resettlement plans.¹⁸

What emerges from the scattered sources available is that refugees, whose presence in Yugoslavia was regarded as strategic, also often proved to be noncompliant with the role being developed for them, as was demonstrated by the escapes reported. A Romanian refugee possibly voiced the feeling of many when he stated that, although Yugoslavia projected an image of "Westernness," the treatment they received convinced them the regime was not very different from the one they were fleeing.¹⁹ By and large, it is likely that Yugoslavia, rather than being a coveted destination, was

simply the only way out for escapees from the neighboring people's democracies who had originally planned to head West.

Transit Country First and Foremost: Eastern European Escapees on the Way to the Western Bloc

On March 5, 1953, the Yugoslav delegation in Geneva communicated their official stance: Eastern European refugees were better off remaining in Yugoslavia, as demonstrated by the fact that refugees had given up on their emigration plans and withdrawn their applications.²⁰ However, with Stalin's death, reported the next day, the geopolitical context changed overnight. Refugees from Eastern European countries lost their strategic value and became an uncomfortable presence on the path toward a *détente* between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Bloc. By the mid-1950s, in the context of normalizing relations with the Soviet Bloc, Yugoslavia decided to rid itself of them.²¹ Sources reported on repatriation campaigns, such the one waged by an Albanian commission that was permitted to visit the camps and lobby for repatriation,²² yet the majority of refugees held in Gerovo apparently succeeded in emigrating to the West rather than returning to their origin countries. Italian sources were likely not far from the truth when they stated that the Yugoslavs had gone so far as to facilitate illegal border crossings into Italy by providing refugees with money and food for the trip.²³

As soon as Gerovo was cleared of refugees who were stranded in the country, it began to serve as one of the main transit points during the major population movement Europe experienced after the displacement that was triggered by the Second World War. Of the roughly 200,000 Hungarians who escaped after the Soviet invasion, 19,587 of them entered Yugoslavia as soon as the Austrian border was sealed. United Nations sources report there were 675 Hungarian refugees who integrated in Yugoslavia and that there was a specific refugee camp for those who wanted to stay (Kovačević 2003, 102).²⁴ Although Yugoslav authorities allegedly tried to lure some members of the technical intelligentsia into remaining in the country (Kovács et al. 2009, 224), it is unlikely that they acquiesced, due to the wide range of alternatives available.

By and large, Yugoslavia served as a temporary refuge for Hungarian escapees awaiting resettlement in overseas locations, an operation concluded by early 1958 (Kovačević 2003, 115–116). The need for a swift transfer of refugees convinced the Yugoslav authorities to allow the establishment of a temporary UNHCR office in Belgrade and to draw on support from the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM) to manage the resettlement operations. For Yugoslavia, the management of the Hungarian crisis was a critical step in the process of repositioning itself within the international refugee regime. The country was listed alongside Austria and Italy as a country of transit and first asylum for defectors from communism eager to reach the “free world.” In 1957–1958, for the first time, Yugoslavia made clear that its role was limited to providing a corridor for refugees rather than a new home.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Yugoslavia acted arbitrarily toward refugees from the Soviet Bloc, either serving as a springboard to emigrating to the West or preventing them from crossing into Italy or Austria. The first instances of Yugoslavia's role as a corridor were primarily a consequence of the nature of refugee flows that reached the country. The vast majority of those who escaped through Yugoslavia came from Eastern Europe and were eager to reach the Western Bloc. They were not interested in staying in Yugoslavia, nor was Yugoslavia willing to become a haven for a highly politicized category of defectors from communist countries. Furthermore, Yugoslavia had reframed its participation in European migration trajectories. During 1962–1963, the country established legal channels for the recruitment of its workers abroad. Employment abroad swiftly became a mass phenomenon. According to the 1971 census, more than one million Yugoslav citizens (including workers and their dependents) lived abroad. Having broken both the socialist taboos of full employment and recruitment of its citizens in the West, for Yugoslavia, it

became an easy task to reframe its position regarding refugees. As a country of emigration, it presented itself as being unable to absorb refugees, except perhaps in very small numbers.

The opening of the office of a UNHCR Honorary Representative in Belgrade in 1976 institutionalized Yugoslavia's integration within the international refugee regime and provided a framework for the role that Yugoslavia carved out for itself as a transit country. According to data provided by the newspaper *Borba*, between 1976 and May 1990 around 25,000 refugees, predominantly coming from Eastern Europe, passed through Yugoslavia (Tomljenović 1990, 25).²⁵

Exceptions Confirming the Rule: The Local Integration of Albanian, Macedonian, and Chilean Refugees

Despite its commitment to emphasizing its role as a transit zone, socialist Yugoslavia did allow a few refugee groups to settle in the country due to a combination of ideological preoccupations and pragmatic reasons. As this section will show, the few integration projects the country embarked on were limited in scope and, paradoxically, served to foster Yugoslavia's role as a place of passage rather than a haven.²⁶

Among the Eastern European refugees who had reached Yugoslavia after 1948, a contingent of Albanian refugees did not leave the country after the mid-1950s. Although more research on this point would be needed, this decision was probably not unconnected to the ongoing tense relations between Yugoslavia and Albania. The willingness to host defectors from the neighboring country was combined with a bottom-up strategy that made Albanian-speaking areas in Yugoslavia a potentially desirable environment for at least some of the Albanian refugees.

When Yugoslavia ratified the 1951 Convention on the status of refugees in 1959, it did so from the twofold position of being a country of integration and of transit. The Yugoslav leadership was able to secure UNHCR support to launch a jointly financed program to integrate Albanian refugees, which ran from 1963 to 1971.²⁷ With US\$200,000 received annually starting in the late 1960s, Yugoslavia was one of the countries receiving the highest amount from the international agency.²⁸ Despite such a significant investment entailing the purchase of houses and land, scholarships, and interventions for professional advancement, flaws in the integration process immediately became apparent. Refugees faced a lack of employment in the Albanian-speaking areas of Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro, which were among the most underdeveloped in the Yugoslav Federation. Years after moving to Yugoslavia, many of these refugees were still living from state aid and in extremely poor conditions.²⁹ Further emigration increasingly emerged as a more alluring prospect for both the Yugoslav state and Albanian refugees. In 1968, out of 2,046 Albanian refugees, only 661 were economically active and 600 were willing to emigrate.³⁰ According to the guidelines put forth that year by the Federal Executive Committee, Albanian refugees should have been free to either stay or emigrate.³¹ Several refugees who had initially remained in Yugoslavia later considered leaving for Western locations.

The unsatisfactory integration of Albanian refugees cannot be separated from the marginal position Albanians, the largest minority, held in Yugoslavia. Yet integration did not go smoothly either for those who were supposed to ethnically belong to one of the constitutive Yugoslav peoples. In their case, rather than employment, the most pressing issue became that of housing (Mirčevska n. d.). According to Yugoslav estimates, in 1958, 40% of Aegean Macedonians who had arrived in Yugoslavia in the aftermath of the Greek Civil War still lacked decent accommodations.³² That this resolution of the housing issue was accomplished not only by building modern apartments where employment was available but also through purchases of houses belonging to Turks who had left the country strongly demonstrates the symbolic meaning attached to integrating members of the kin nation into the Macedonian social fabric (Pezo 2013; Limantzakis 2017, 108).³³

The still unresolved issues related to the integration of the first waves of Aegean Macedonian refugees affected the entry policy set by Yugoslavia toward others who had found themselves scattered across the Soviet Bloc. In fact, the Aegean Macedonians residing in the Soviet Union,

Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland considered moving to Yugoslavia once the normalization of intrasocialist relations made it possible.³⁴ Rather than enthusiastically opening its doors to coethnic refugees, Yugoslavia carefully set yearly quotas for them so as to not exacerbate unemployment or put pressure on the available housing stock.

Political and pragmatic criteria were intertwined when it came to determining who would be allowed in first. Initially, only those who had certain political merits—for example, fighters in the Democratic Army—or who had family members in the Republic of Macedonia qualified for “repatriation.” Between 1959 and mid-1961, within the resettlement plans, only 76 individuals were dispatched to Yugoslavia,³⁵ although these limits were later relaxed. The decision to allow in significant numbers of Aegean Macedonians came as the result of different considerations. Initially, Aegean Macedonians were regarded as a core group of pro-Yugoslav sympathizers, so their presence in other Eastern European countries was deemed to have propagandistic value, so much so that their plans to resettle were hampered. Paradoxically, their alleged loyalty was an initial obstruction to possible integration but it was a different, external political move that hastened their resettlement in Yugoslavia. Drawing on the rising discontent among Aegean Macedonian refugees, Bulgarian authorities in the Soviet Bloc countries initiated counterpropaganda to entice them to resettle to Bulgaria, which tacitly meant taking on a Bulgarian identity.³⁶ Yugoslavia responded by accelerating resettlement (Mirčevska n.d.). In some instances, it was the refugees themselves who reported Bulgarian propaganda to the Macedonian Federal Executive Committee to advocate for faster resettlement in Yugoslavia.³⁷ Administrative bodies at different levels were flooded with petitions and requests for resettlement from Aegean Macedonians from all over the Eastern Bloc.³⁸ Despite these political calculations, Yugoslavia was still fearful of an influx of individuals who could potentially contribute to rising unemployment. Annual quotas prioritized experts and skilled workers, even though the majority of applicants were unskilled workers.³⁹ The process of resettling Macedonians from Eastern European countries lasted until the early 1980s and was essentially dependent on housing availability (Brown 2003, 34; Mirčevska n.d.).

Intertwining national and ideological criteria and pragmatic concerns also marked a unique instance of resettlement for a small contingent of Chilean refugees—the only refugee group from outside of Europe, whose flight after the September 11, 1973, coup d’état prompted a swift response across both Western and Eastern Europe (Wright and Oñate Zúñiga 2007; Christiaens, Goddeeris, and Rodríguez García 2014). Yugoslavia was among the first countries to raise the issue of foreign refugees who had found themselves in Chile after the coup,⁴⁰ and it responded positively to the High Commissioner’s request to allow in a group of refugees who had displayed some interest in Yugoslavia.⁴¹ Some of the refugees probably were sympathetic to the Yugoslav political experiment or had already established contacts in the country, whereas others were descendants of immigrants from what was now Yugoslav territory.⁴² The resettlement procedures went slowly, and Yugoslav authorities noticed that refugees in search of resettlement had become less socially and ideologically desirable.⁴³ In fact, in the eyes of the Yugoslav authorities, the most “interesting figures” had already left and those still available held uncertain political ideas and party affiliations along with being in poor health and having insufficient labor skills.⁴⁴ It was better that those with such profiles not be admitted. In 1974, Yugoslavia decided to admit 100 Chilean refugees.⁴⁵ Besides them, Yugoslavia would later admit an additional small contingent of Argentinian refugees in collaboration with the UNHCR after a careful examination of their political profiles.⁴⁶ In other cases, such as the writer Juan Octavio Prenz, previously established contacts shaped their trajectory.⁴⁷ Prenz, for example, had previously resided in Yugoslavia with his family and worked as a professor of Spanish language. The political capital possessed by exiles from the Latin American right-wing dictatorship guaranteed them hospitality in Yugoslavia. Despite Yugoslavia’s alleged commitment, however, many Latin American refugees left within few years. In the 1980s, when the size of refugee movements greatly increased in conjunction with a decreasing availability of countries accepting new refugees, the departure for Western Europe of Chilean refugees originally intending to integrate into

Yugoslavia would be used by Yugoslav diplomats as grounds for declining any further relocation of refugees and a means of fostering its image as exclusively a transit country.

Uneven Resettlement Opportunities: Constructing National Hierarchies Through Ease of Transit

The role of transit country that Yugoslavia had ascribed to itself depended on the availability of other countries willing to accept its refugees. From the start of cooperation between the UNHCR and Yugoslavia, resettlement opportunities never kept pace with emigration requests. This was evidenced by the brand-new refugee shelter built with UNHCR funding in the city of Banja Koviljača to host meetings between refugees and foreign recruitment delegations, which often stood empty. Albanians, the largest refugee group in the 1960s, became the target of a resettlement program, which still had to grapple with Western countries appearing less willing to welcome refugees.

In 1968, a representative of the World Council of Churches, a Christian ecumenical organization, visited Yugoslavia to help facilitate emigration to Australia and New Zealand. But in the end, only 39 of the 500 individuals interviewed were selected.⁴⁸ An additional complication in the eyes of the authorities was that often refugees wanted to make determinations for themselves and choose where they would be resettled. For instance, they preferred the United States or European destinations over Australia, which mainly recruited agricultural laborers.⁴⁹ The length of the official resettlement procedures made informal solutions preferable. Refugees were often dispatched to the border by the Yugoslav authorities and would enter Italy without any previous agreement for later resettlement in the United States,⁵⁰ an informal practice apparently tolerated by the UNHCR.⁵¹

Yet it was the national belonging of refugees that shaped the array of opportunities they were offered. This was best illustrated by the case of the Czechoslovaks who were generously welcomed in the Western Bloc after the 1968 Soviet invasion. Their average middle-class background and high education level made them desirable for many resettlement countries. As an ICEM officer stated, “the professional profile of the Czechoslovak refugees was exceptionally high and [...] therefore they have had no problems, in general, to find employment” mainly in Switzerland and West Germany.⁵² This was particularly true for those who were abroad at the time of the Soviet invasion. Czechoslovaks on holiday in Yugoslavia had to consider whether to return home and could count on aid and support from local organizations, which involved bottom-up engagement (*Novi List*, 1968, 3). Some of them relied on indirect support received in Yugoslavia to embark on a path that eventually resulted in emigration. If they ran out of money, car owners were provided with petrol, which they often used to reach Austria.⁵³

In some instances, the desirability of Czechoslovak refugees provoked competition with other refugees. One UNHCR officer, for example, claimed that Sweden had stopped recruiting Albanian refugees from Yugoslavia because highly skilled Czechoslovak refugees had become available.⁵⁴ It was probably no coincidence that no foreign delegation visited Yugoslavia in the fall of 1968, following the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.⁵⁵ Once again, bias against a national group was packaged in legal terms to decline resettlement. Albanian refugees who were willing to emigrate continued to have issues with being accepted by other countries, often due to the pretext that they had lost their right to asylum after being in Yugoslavia for so long.⁵⁶ Albanians were also the most stigmatized due to deeply rooted prejudices as well as their low educational levels and large families with many dependents, which discouraged countries of emigration. In 1971, when the Swedish delegation reestablished contacts with the Yugoslav authorities, they stated they were only willing to host small families.⁵⁷

In the 1980s, the number of Eastern European asylum seekers annually in Yugoslavia increased to between 2,000 and 3,000. The largest groups, Czechoslovaks and Romanians, represented the two opposite ends of the spectrum.⁵⁸ Czechoslovaks, among whom were many families with children,

usually entered Yugoslavia as tourists. In most cases, they took the opportunity of being in the country legally to submit an asylum request. As one Yugoslav diplomat put it, the image Czechoslovaks conveyed was that of a people with long-established democratic traditions, who could draw on an extensive network of contacts in Western countries. Although they often stated that their country was under Soviet occupation, it was hard to regard them as being persecuted when they arrived by car and came with travel documents and foreign currency.⁵⁹ Yet once they were processed by the UNHCR branch office in Belgrade, their resettlement went far more smoothly than it did for others. Because Czechoslovak refugees rarely became a burden, Yugoslav authorities regarded them more favorably. Later in the 1980s, fewer Czechoslovaks were given refugee status after applying to the UNHCR while on holiday, but they could usually return home safely without having spent time abroad illegally.

Romanians, on the other hand, were ready to face any risk to escape the unbearable situation in their country. Many, mostly single men, tempted fate by swimming across the Danube. This became one of the most hazardous segments of the route to the Western Bloc, with an unknown number of casualties.⁶⁰ Romanians soon replaced Albanians at the bottom of the hierarchies created by both foreign delegations and, consequently, the Yugoslav authorities. Romanians were often stigmatized by resettlement countries for their “antisocial behaviour, unwillingness to work, and criminal mindset.” For instance, Australia reduced the quotas for Romanians because of their “negative features.”⁶¹

The Yugoslav authorities’ fear that Romanians could become a burden led them to prevent those with few opportunities of resettlement from entering the country. Some Romanians were sent back at the border, despite the mistreatment and, according to some allegations, torture awaiting those who returned. When interviewed by a Yugoslav magazine, a well-educated Romanian refugee recalled what he had witnessed at the border. The Yugoslav border police made selections to ensure that those who entered fulfilled the resettlement criteria. “Gypsies and those who did not seem civilised or intelligent enough” were immediately returned, whereas all Germans and Hungarians were let in, as they would be taken by their kin states.⁶²

Such prejudices allegedly sparked a vicious circle, with stranded refugees being regarded as more likely to commit crimes, which in some cases included illegally crossing the border.⁶³ For instance, Romanian refugees caught after attempting to reach Western borders were in some cases deported back to Romania.⁶⁴ In other cases, misconduct was mentioned as grounds for deporting those already granted refugee status, which triggered protests from the UNHCR.⁶⁵ A biased approach toward Romanian refugees was reported by various sources until the end of the 1980s.

Hierarchies of refugees resulted from a combination of prejudices, ease of resettlement, and the course of bilateral relations with their countries of origin. By late 1990, when Albanian refugees started pouring into the country and their resettlement elsewhere slowed, prescreening Albanian refugees at the border and returning many without referring to them to the UNHCR had become the norm. When asked by the UNHCR, a Yugoslav official pointed to alleged Albanian “misbehavior” and inability to “help themselves.”⁶⁶ In the same years in which the “myth of Central Europe” gained momentum among intellectuals and dissidents in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, thus further marginalizing the Balkans (Todorova 2009), a hierarchy shaped by the admission policy of the Western countries emerged in Yugoslavia’s refugee policy: those from the northern countries of the Soviet Bloc, mostly entering Yugoslavia as tourists, versus those from the South who risked their lives in desperate attempts at border crossings.

Hierarchies among refugees were even more striking along the dichotomy of European versus non-European refugees. Recent research has emphasized how nonalignment was not only a top-down project; it was also reflected in the social practices, trajectories, and experiences of the average Yugoslav citizen (Spaskovska, Mark, and Bieber 2021; Stubbs 2023). Nonetheless, despite its vocal emphasis on its lack of colonial past and its loud commitment to antiracism, Yugoslavia was far from exempt from racialized constructions (Baker 2018; Subotic and Vucetic 2019; Wright 2022).

Yugoslavia's ambivalent attitude entangled with hierarchies produced elsewhere to set the stage for an unequal treatment of non-European refugees.

In the 1980s, there were few non-European asylum seekers.⁶⁷ In 1982, for instance, there were 2,019 asylum seekers from Eastern Europe and 110 from outside of Europe. Unsurprisingly, the latter had more difficulty being accepted by countries of emigration. Yugoslavia often appealed to the universality of the Refugee Convention to lobby resettlement countries to accept more non-Europeans. This advocacy produced meager results. The intersection of racial, class, and educational biases dramatically reduced opportunities for resettlement. In the late 1980s, the only Western country taking in non-Europeans was Canada, which still accepted only refugees with strong educational backgrounds and language skills.⁶⁸

Furthermore, the low number of non-Europeans among asylum seekers might be misleading. Even though Yugoslavia joined the 1967 Protocol that enlarged the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees to include those from outside Europe, there is some evidence the Yugoslav authorities did not present all the asylum seekers' cases to the UNHCR. This differential approach to refugee rights became evident toward the end of the 1980s, when the number of arrivals from non-European countries increased. According to rumor, the Yugoslav authorities "would try to 'solve' the cases of illegal immigrants with their respective country of origin, and would then present to the UNHCR any cases that remain unsolved."⁶⁹ These contradictions materialized at Padinska Skela, which was both a closed camp for asylum seekers who had entered the country illegally, mostly from Eastern Europe, and an immigration detention center for foreigners who had violated Yugoslav law. Among the latter, many were labeled as illegal migrants and prevented from applying for asylum. In 1990, a group of people from Ghana and Sudan along with a Turkish Kurd submitted a letter to the local UNHCR branch reporting they had never been interviewed.⁷⁰

Yugoslavia's much praised politics of open borders led to many tourists entering solely to establish contact with the UNHCR.⁷¹ For some, including Iranian, Iraqi, and Turkish nationals, Yugoslavia served as a temporary transit zone.⁷² Sweden advocated for stricter controls by the Yugoslav airline company to prevent Iraqi and Iranian refugees from reaching the country.⁷³ Yugoslavia responded by criticizing Sweden for being prepared to accept only European refugees.

At international gatherings, Yugoslavia pleaded for resettlement to not exclude refugees from Africa and Asia.⁷⁴ It appealed to the universality of the refugee issue and tried to show that the UNHCR office in Belgrade was not well positioned on the Cold War map to be a springboard for defectors from socialist countries. During his visit to Yugoslavia, the same High Commissioner Poul Hartling agreed with the Yugoslavs on the selectiveness of resettlement countries, with Arab refugees being the most discriminated against.⁷⁵ Discriminatory practices enacted by the countries of resettlement combined with limited resources available for refugees in Yugoslavia resulted in constant overcrowding in refugee facilities. In 1989, Padinska Skela, which had a capacity of 160, housed 560 refugees waiting for their asylum applications to be processed. At that time, there was a reported increase in the number of those rejected by more than one country, and some refugees already rejected by three countries had disappeared.⁷⁶

From the 1980s, in particular, when the influx of refugees increased and the local economy started crumbling, Yugoslavia became even more vocal with its international counterparts in stressing its role as a transit country where refugees were meant to remain for a limited time before being resettled. This same concept of transit entailed different practices that marked Yugoslavia's position within the international refugee regime. Until the early 1980s, many refugees passed through Yugoslavia and crossed illegally into neighboring countries, primarily Italy. This practice, named "raw transit" (*prosti tranzit*), was allegedly brought to a halt in 1982 due to complaints from neighboring countries.⁷⁷ The result was that the outflow of refugees from Yugoslavia was heavily dependent on the resettlement capacity of the UNHCR branch office in Belgrade, increasing the risk of refugees being stranded in the country. When pleading with the UNHCR for faster resettlement, Yugoslavia maintained that it could not tolerate any concentration of refugees within its territory.⁷⁸

This by no means meant that Yugoslavia was unable to control its own borders. Rather, it was Yugoslav border guards who performed the first prescreening and turned some away before they could submit an asylum request. In 1989, according to UNHCR estimates, 10% were prevented from claiming asylum, which was in addition to an unknown number of cases not being deferred to the international agency.⁷⁹ The Belgrade airport, then a large international hub, was not fully accessible to the refugee agency, and not all new arrivals were allowed to apply for asylum. This obviously had a greater effect on non-European refugees.

Additionally, Yugoslavia presenting itself as a country of emigration rather than immigration served as grounds for declining requests to integrate even small groups of refugees. For instance, despite its commitment to the Palestinian cause, it dismissed a UNHCR request to integrate a small group of Palestinian refugees. One of the arguments was that the status of transit country was not exclusively imposed from above by Yugoslavia and was instead constructed by refugees themselves. According to the Yugoslavs, the Palestinians would have left, as many Chilean refugees had done, and instead gone to Western countries or countries where it would be easier to learn the language.⁸⁰ From time to time, the UNHCR authorities advocated for Yugoslavia integrating small contingents of refugees, especially those from Arab countries who had already been in the country for some time.⁸¹ Just as it fiercely advocated for its role as a transit country, Yugoslav authorities also rejected the possibility of integrating any refugee by appealing to the refugees' own agency, claiming that none of them actually wanted to stay.⁸²

Joining the Kin State: Ethnicizing Refugee Policy

In the late 1980s, the stark economic crisis along with hyperinflation, rising unemployment, and an inability to comply with foreign debt obligations contributed to the shrinking possibilities for integrating foreigners. However, another element stemming from the Yugoslav domestic landscape influenced its position regarding refugees. The escalation of conflicting nationalisms in the country went hand in hand with the ethnicization of its refugee policy. To some extent, this was also influenced by the European context. Starting in the late 1980s, an increasing number of people on the move in Eastern Europe were ethnic minorities in their countries of origin and began heading for what had been framed as their kin state. The refugee situation in Yugoslavia demonstrated this trend. Among the many who left Romania and reached Yugoslavia in the 1980s were ethnic Hungarians, Germans, and Jews, and they had a much easier path than the ethnic Romanians.⁸³ Turkey was initially hesitant about issuing visas to ethnic Turks expelled from Bulgaria without family ties in the country, but it eventually accepted them.⁸⁴

Yet the ethnicization of refugee policy was catalyzed by the question of Kosovo, which served as a litmus test for the tensions stirring Yugoslav society during the country's last decade (Pichler, Grandits, and Fotiadis 2021). The Milošević government's crackdown on the Albanian population in the autonomous province of Kosovo played out poorly for Albanian refugees who had resettled in Yugoslavia much earlier as well as for the newly arrived. By March 1989, 430 measures had been applied against Albanian refugees residing in Yugoslavia who were suspected of subversive activities,⁸⁵ and in spring 1990, a campaign against them was orchestrated in the Serbian media. Refugees were accused of having "abused their hospitality" and committing crimes as heinous as rape, robbery, and activities against the state.⁸⁶ This last allegation was related to some refugees' involvement in movements advocating for significant autonomy and the creation of a republic in Kosovo in the late 1960s and again in 1981, when there were significant tensions in the province.⁸⁷ In other cases, the Yugoslav authorities had used the limited possibilities for some refugees to integrate as a reason to reject even small groups of them. Paradoxically, in this case, they pointed to refugees' level of integration and involvement in the workforce. In fact, a second round of allegations targeted refugees accused of having violated employment regulations for foreign citizens, which supposedly excluded them from jobs involving security and maintaining public order and, in some cases, the possibility of carrying weapons—such as in the case of foresters and

watchmen. Similarly, other instances of successful integration into the labor market were targeted. For example, several refugees were accused of having violated the law by taking jobs as teachers or nurses, and even as the head of a medical center in Pristina.⁸⁸

The rise of nationalism in Yugoslavia undid the previous integration for Albanians, one of the few groups allowed to stay in the country. By April 1990, fifty refugees had become “serious candidates for expulsion.”⁸⁹ The controversy became increasingly enmeshed with domestic Yugoslav tensions when some Slovenian representatives granted protection to refugees threatened with expulsion.⁹⁰ In the 1980s, opposition to the crackdown on human rights in Kosovo by the Serbian leadership came to symbolize Slovenian resistance to attacks against the prerogatives of the republics and autonomous provinces granted by the 1974 Constitution (Ramšak 2021). Refugee policies became intertwined with wider issues making waves throughout the Yugoslav Federation.

Newly arrived refugees from Albania were in an even more precarious position when confronted with false allegations, a negative media campaign, and ill treatment.⁹¹ Tensions over Kosovo also became enmeshed with plans for integrating refugees. In 1991, for the first time in many years, a large group of people from Albania made up of 1,600 ethnic Serbs/Montenegrins and 250 ethnic Macedonians was granted refugee status and allowed local integration.⁹² In September 1991, when war had already broken out in Croatia, there were plans to resettle 1,366 from the first group (the rest had allegedly returned to Albania voluntarily).⁹³ Although the UNHCR sources do not indicate whether this project was implemented, the use of refugees to alter the ethnic balance in Kosovo seemed a sinister precedent to the resettlement in Kosovo of Serb refugees from Krajina in the summer of 1995.

As has been demonstrated, the ethnicization of refugee policies, which had been initiated outside of Yugoslavia with the “return” of ethnic minorities to their kin states across Eastern Europe, eventually affected Yugoslavia. With the dissolution of the country looming in the background, the right to stay and integrate locally became dependent on ethnic belonging.

Conclusion

Although we focused on refugee policies in socialist Yugoslavia in this article, we would like to advance some reflections that potentially contribute to the debate on current refugee issues.

Two shifts in Yugoslavia—the transition from claiming that it could integrate refugees to (with a few exceptions) becoming a transit country and from claiming it could adhere to the socialist mantra of full employment to becoming an exporter of labor—happened simultaneously and were deeply intertwined. Once plans for a more ideologized refugee regime faded away and the country started cultivating good relations with Western countries, Yugoslavia conveniently positioned itself at the border of the international refugee regime, attempting to benefit from its own liminality. In fact, drawing on its unique geopolitical position and domestic conjunctions, it pleaded for faster resettlement and furthered its claim that it could not integrate anyone.

The management of refugees in a country with tight political and social control was a top-down project in which the state determined which refugee groups were allowed to transit or resettle. Still, in some cases, refugees were able to decide whether to make Yugoslavia their new home or a place of passage. Paradoxically, the strictly limited opportunities made available to refugees gave rise to a situation that was used by the Yugoslav authorities in the 1980s to decline any further integration of refugees on the grounds that they would probably leave as other refugees had done before—an argument that has been revived in Eastern European states in recent years.⁹⁴

Interestingly, peripherality has also been used in the Yugoslav successor states as a ground for discarding responsibilities for refugees. During the humanitarian crisis following 2015, with increased movement of refugees and migrants into Europe, post-Yugoslav states emphasized their being exclusively transit countries.⁹⁵ Initially, they did not register significant opposition to refugee flows, providing that transit was smooth. Hostility against refugees gained traction as soon as Yugoslav successor states turned into cul-de-sacs for refugees attempting to reach the European

Union. Racial hierarchies were framed between refugee groups and between refugees and locals, sometimes using the past Yugoslav engagement in the Non-Aligned Movement to elude allegations of racism (Helms 2024).

This article demonstrates the extent to which Yugoslavia's self-ascribed role of temporary refuge or permanent haven was produced by the host society, potential countries of resettlement, and refugees. The duration of the refugees' stay depended on the conditions provided by the host country and available opportunities for emigration, but how smoothly resettlement went was determined by hierarchies based on features attached to different groups according to ethnic, social, and political criteria. Determinations of refugees' desirability were shaped by well-established prejudices and consideration of their employability, which was affected by the circumstances of their arrival in the country. Illegal border crossings cast a shadow of suspicion on certain refugees, which contributed to their perceived undesirability. Conversely, those who arrived as tourists were more frequently from a middle-class background and much less likely to end up stranded in refugee camps. That some nationals were more likely to become a burden led the host state to replicate the hierarchies constructed by the resettlement countries, an element that became particularly striking in the case of non-European refugees.

This article is focused not only on Yugoslavia as a place of passage for individuals on the move but on what the notion of "being a transit country" suggests. In fact, for a state to agree to play the role of a transit country does not mean its borders are open to all refugee groups equally. This topic has been dramatically brought to the fore since 2022 by the difference between responses to Ukrainian refugees and responses to non-Europeans coming from other war-torn countries.

In the first postwar decades, whether Yugoslavia had bilateral relations with refugees' country of origin was prominent in the decision to grant asylum to a particular refugee group, but with the increasing integration of Yugoslavia into the international refugee regime in the late 1970s, the presence of opportunities for resettlement became crucial in the decision to allow the transit of some groups. By the 1980s, as the opportunities for resettlement diminished, Yugoslavia began fearing it would become a dead end for those who were granted refugee status but not accepted for emigration. This approach replicated the biases that affected Western refugee policies, but with even more dramatic consequences when refugees were returned to their own countries. Tragically, similar processes are at stake even today in countries that have been enlisted to protect the EU's external borders.

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Notes

- 1 UNHCR Archives, Records of the central registry, Refugee situations, Romanian refugees in Yugoslavia (11/3/10-100.YUG.ROM), "Yugoslavia is (not) a refugee country," translation. The article featured an interview with Predrag Ćulafić, head of the Department for Border Affairs, Foreigners and Travel Documents of the Federal Secretariat for Internal Affairs. Therefore, it presented the official stances of the Yugoslav government on refugee matters.
- 2 Archivio della Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (hereafter, APCM), Ufficio Zone di Confine (UZC), Jugoslavia, sez. 2, b. 12 vol. II, Rifugiati italiani in Jugoslavia, February 13, 1953.

- 3 Državni Arhiv Ministarstva Spoljnjih Poslova Srbije (hereafter, DAMSP), Politička arhiva (PA), UN, 1951, fasc. 102, d. 8, 410814, Zabeleška o sastanku sa g. D. Vickersom, predstavnikom Visokog komesara UN za izbeglice, August 20, 1951.
- 4 Although there are some inconsistencies concerning their exact number, according to the Yugoslav federal sources, 24,880 refugees were registered as living in Macedonia in 1956 (Mirčevska, n.d.).
- 5 DAMSP, PA, UN, 1951, fasc. 102, d. 8, 410814.
- 6 DAMSP, PA, UN, 1968, fasc. 212, d. 5, 44116.
- 7 Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Archives, Refugees in Yugoslavia, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80-00809A000600210273-6.pdf>
- 8 APCM, UZC, Trieste, sez. II, b. 58 vol. 1, f. 110/6.
- 9 CIA Archives, Yugoslav Treatment of Rumanian Refugees, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80-00810A002000130010-4.pdf>.
- 10 DAMSP, PA, UN, 1951, fasc. 102, d. 8, 410814, Zabeleška o II radnom sastanku sa g. D. Vickersom, predstavnikom Visokog Komesara za izbeglice, August 22, 1951. According to data provided by the Yugoslav authorities, there were 2,000 refugees as of August 1951. According to Vernant's estimates, 4,400 refugees had already crossed the border as of April 1951, accounting for approximately half of those who had entered Yugoslavia (Vernant 1953, 228).
- 11 DAMSP, PA, UN, 1951, fasc. 102, d. 8, 410814, Zabeleška o II radnom sastanku sa g. D. Vickersom, predstavnikom Visokog Komesara za izbeglice, August 22, 1951.
- 12 DAMSP, PA, UN, 1951, fasc. 102, d. 8, 410814, Izveštaj delegacije FNRI na konferenciji za izradu konvencije o izbeglicama.
- 13 DAMSP, PA, UN, 1951, fasc. 108, d. 6, 415366.
- 14 Gerrit Jan van Heuven, "The Refugee in the Post-War World," statement by the Secretariat of the United Nations, January 17, 1952, <https://www.unhcr.org/admin/hcspeeches/3ae68fa87/refugee-post-war-world-statement-secretariat-united-nations.html>
- 15 DAMSP, PA, UN, 1953, fasc. 112, d. 6, 410392.
- 16 UNHCR Archives, Records of the central registry, 11/3/10-100.YUG.ROM, High Commissioner to Mr B. G. Alexander, December 18, 1953.
- 17 CIA Archives, Yugoslav Treatment of Rumanian Refugees; CIA Archives, Association of Rumanian Political Refugees, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80-00810A001500330005-4.pdf>.
- 18 CIA Archives, Yugoslav Treatment of Rumanian Refugees.
- 19 Blinken Open Society Archivum (hereafter OSA), Romanian Unity. Subject Files (300-60), box 197, Rumanian Exiles in Yugoslavia.
- 20 DAMSP, PA, UN, 1953, fasc. 112, d. 4, 43924.
- 21 OSA, Czechoslovak Unit. Old Code Subject Files I (300-30-2), box 76, The Yugoslav government decision concerning refugees, 1955.
- 22 CIA Archives, Repatriation of Albanian Refugees in Yugoslavia, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80-00810A007000850009-5.pdf>.
- 23 APCM, Trieste, sez. II, b. 58 vol. II, 6359.
- 24 UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, January 1, 1959, A/3828/Rev.1, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae68c800.html>.
- 25 This number is consistent with the figure of 18,756 refugees registered by the UNHCR for the period between 1976 and 1987 (UNHCR Archives, Refugee Situation—Statistics Yugoslavia (11/3/13-130.YUG), Country Overview, 2).
- 26 This article focuses on two cases of integration of "international" refugees that were supported or coordinated by the UNHCR, those of Albanian and Chilean refugees and a case of integration of "national" refugees—namely, Macedonian refugees, who belonged to one of the (constitutive) Yugoslav nations. The distinction between "international" and "national" refugees, which draws

- on Ballinger's (2020) work, does not emerge explicitly in the sources but rather in the Yugoslav attitude toward different groups. Integrating individuals belonging to a Yugoslav constitutive nation into the "kin state" was regarded as a domestic matter, whereas other refugees—including members of a Yugoslav nationality—were regarded as foreigners awarded asylum in Yugoslavia, and the UNHCR was involved in their management. Yet the boundaries between "international" and "national" refugees were often challenged. For instance, Hungarian refugees who settled in Yugoslavia are not mentioned in any international agreement in Yugoslav Federal sources. In contrast, among Chilean refugees were members of constitutive Yugoslav nations.
- 27 Arhiv Jugoslavije (AJ), Savezno izvršno veće (130), k. 594, Informacija o albanskim izbeglicama u Jugoslaviji, November 4, 1968, 3.
 - 28 DAMSP, PA, UN, 1968, fasc. 212, d. 5, 436040.
 - 29 AJ, 130, k. 594, Informacija o albanskim izbeglicama, 4.
 - 30 DAMSP, PA, UN, 1968, fasc. 212, d. 5, 44116.
 - 31 AJ, 130, k. 594, Informacija o albanskim izbeglicama, 6.
 - 32 AJ, 130, k. 594, Analiza o mogućnostima za prijem izbeglica iz Jegejske Makedonije koji nameravaju da se vrate u NR Makedoniju i za stambeni problem onih koji se nalaze u NRM, 1958, 3–5.
 - 33 AJ, 130, k. 594, Analiza o mogućnostima za prijem izbeglica, 3.
 - 34 According to the estimates of the Federal Executive Council, in 1958 they numbered 30,000 and 80%–90% of them were willing to emigrate to Yugoslavia. AJ, 130, k. 594, Analiza o mogućnostima za prijem izbeglica, 1–3.
 - 35 AJ, 130, k. 594, Problem izbeglica iz Jegejske Makedonije, April 20, 1961.
 - 36 AJ, 130, k. 594, Informacija o pitanju useljenja Jegejskih Makedonaca u Jugoslaviju i Bugarsku, 1; DAMSP, PA, Bugarska, fasc. 15, d. 38, 436469.
 - 37 AJ, 130, k. 594, Problem izbeglica iz Jegejske Makedonije, 1–2.
 - 38 AJ, 130, k. 345.
 - 39 See for instance AJ, Kabinet Predsednika Republike (837), k. 356, 1965–1966.
 - 40 DAMSP, PA, OUN, 1973, fasc. 175, d. 1, 444792.
 - 41 DAMSP, PA, OUN, 1973, fasc. 175, d. 1, 446803.
 - 42 DAMSP, PA, OUN, 1973, fasc. 175, d. 1, 448882.
 - 43 DAMSP, PA, OUN, 1974, fasc. 211, d. 1, 411234.
 - 44 DAMSP, PA, OUN, 1974, fasc. 211, d. 1, 42016.
 - 45 DAMSP, PA, OUN, 1974, fasc. 211, d. 1, 437838, Govor šefa delegacije SFRJ na XXV zasedanju Izvšnog komiteta VKI Ženeva, October 15, 1974.
 - 46 DAMSP, PA, OUN, 1977, fasc. 203, d. 1, 429727.
 - 47 Betina Prenz, conversation with the author in 2023.
 - 48 DAMSP, PA, UN, 1968, fasc. 212, d. 5, 47152; DAMSP, PA, UN, 1968, fasc. 212, d. 5, 425204.
 - 49 DAMSP, PA, UN, 1968, fasc. 212, d. 5, 44116.
 - 50 DAMSP, PA, UN, 1960, fasc. 158, d. 9, 22965.
 - 51 DAMSP, PA, UN, 1968, fasc. 212, d. 5, 44116.
 - 52 OSA, Czechoslovak unit. Old Subject Files III (300-30-4), box 71, ICEM says fewer CS refugees.
 - 53 Izložba u izložbi, Odjeci '68. u Rijeci na fotografijama Miljenka i Ranka Smokvine, Državni arhiv u Rijeci, <http://www.riarhiv.hr/Pdfovi/katalogweb.pdf>.
 - 54 DAMSP, PA, UN, 1968, fasc. 212, d. 5, 436513.
 - 55 DAMSP, PA, UN, 1968, fasc. 212, d. 5, 436625.
 - 56 DAMSP, PA, UN, 1969, fasc. 205, d. 5, 416712.
 - 57 DAMSP, PA, UN, 1971, fasc. 222, d. 2, 45508.
 - 58 DAMSP, PA, OUN, 1984, fasc. 141, d. 1, 49290.
 - 59 DAMSP, PA, OUN, 1982, fasc. 142, d. 7, 448766.
 - 60 OSA 300-60-1, box 200 (Exile, Refugees and Migrants 1982-1985).
 - 61 DAMSP, PA, OUN, 1985, fasc. 146, d. 1, 4852.

- 62 UNHCR Archives, 11/3/10-100.YUG.ROM, “Sedam nedelja pakla,” *Non – Nove Omladinske Novine*, February 18, 1990.
- 63 DAMSP, PA, OUN, 1985, fasc. 146, d. 1, 4852.
- 64 OUN, PA, DAMSP, 1983, fasc. 142, d. 1, 46736.
- 65 OUN, PA, DAMSP, 1984, fasc. 141, d. 1, 442798.
- 66 UNHCR Archives, Refugee Situation—Special Groups of Refugees—Refugees in Yugoslavia (11/3/10-100.YUG.GEN), Notes for the file, Meeting with Federal Secretariat for Internal Affairs, November 27, 1990.
- 67 For instance, in the years 1976–1985, of the 14,292 individuals assisted by the UNHCR branch office in Belgrade, 425 were non-Europeans. Among them, the largest nationalities were Ethiopians (86), Iranians (79), Chileans (65), Iraqis (56), Afghans (33), and Vietnamese (28). See UNHCR Archives, Refugee Situation—Statistics—Yugoslavia (11/3/11-120.YUG), 10 years refugee statistics 1976–1985.
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