

The Yugoslav Gastarbeiters' Return Home:

a Chronological Division

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Introduction

The *Gastarbeiter* phenomenon has tangibly marked Yugoslavia. There is much evidence to prove it – e.g., the number of Yugoslav workers who left the country, the sum of their remittances, the pop culture that inspired them or that they promoted. The aim of this paper is to provide an insight into what the *Gastarbeiter* phenomenon signified for Yugoslavia through the analysis of the Yugoslav authorities' approach towards the *Gastarbeiters'* return home.

The frequent *Gastarbeiters'* visits in Yugoslavia, as well as the money they sent home to the family, generated expectations not only within the *Gastarbeiters'* family network, but also in the institutional spheres and in their local community. However, even if significant regional and national differences emerged,¹ the initiatives which the Yugoslav authorities took in order to promote the *Gastarbeiters'* projects/investments domestically often failed, affecting not only the returnees, but also Yugoslav society as a whole.

In order to analyze the above-mentioned aspects, I will provide a chronological division of the Yugoslav political debate on the (expected) *Gastarbeiter* return, from the beginning of the 1970s until the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1991. I have identified three periods: 1972–1975; 1975–1983; 1983–1991. Each of them is marked by a different domestic and international conjuncture and a different attitude towards the potential returnees.

The thesis supporting this chronological division is that when the *Gastarbeiters* started coming back in the 1970s, the Yugoslav authorities were taken by surprise. Even if in the political discourse the Yugoslav workers “temporarily” abroad were always considered as part of Yugoslav society, no plan for their return appears to have been implemented until the 1970s. It was only with the halt on recruitment in Western Europe in November 1973 that the Yugoslav elites started to take into consideration the possibility of *Gastarbeiters'* seriously coming back.

1. From *laissez-faire* to State Control: The End of a “Full-benefit” *Gastarbeiters'* Emigration (1972–1975)

Since the economic benefit of the temporary working abroad was already recognized by the Yugoslav establishment in 1961, it was only ten years later that its function was publicly admitted and that the discussions on the problems related to workers' emigration entered the political debate.² Croatia was the first republic where the economic necessity of worker emigrations provoked scholarly and scientific criticisms warning about the multi-faceted consequences of emigration.³ However, the main concerns were still regarding emigration issues, in particular “brain drain” and the activity of the *neprijetelska emigracija* – the anti-Yugoslav political emigrants. It was only due to the halt on recruitment (November 1973) and the echo of the high-pitched discussion in Western Europe with regard to the dismissal of foreign workers that the return of the *Gastarbeiters* started to receive more institutional attention.⁴ Even so, the knowledge of the *Gastarbeiters'* conditions abroad was too defective and inadequate to take over control of this situation efficiently and quickly.

During the 1960s, the Yugoslav migration policy consisted mainly of making agreements on recruitment, medical/retirement insurances with the host countries' departments and through contact with foreign Trade Unions, who dealt with the rights of the *Gastarbeiters* as workers.⁵ The care for the *Gastarbeiters'* everyday needs had been delegated to the self-organization of different local and Yugoslav actors, which collaborated only occasionally.⁶ The result was that the service was discontinuous and often overlapped with the social activity of the Catholic institutions.⁷ This could probably be identified as an additional motivation, which explains why the *Gastarbeiters*, who decided to go abroad legally, i.e. with the help of the office for employment (*zavod za zaposljavanje*), continued to be a minority group. The fact that only unqualified and unemployed workers could apply for a job abroad, and that a long period of time elapsed between application and departure, contrasted with the simplicity and rapidity of informal networks, which offered, together with the job, the significant advantage of the support of relatives/friends with considerable experience in the host country.

In conclusion, the weak Yugoslav institutional presence abroad and its unsuitable actions severely compromised the implementation of an appropriate reintegration policy.

2. The Yugoslav Reintegration Policy as a Policy of Money Recruitment. The Fear of the *Gastarbeiters'* Self-initiatives and the Need for their Savings (1975–1983)

As mentioned above, it was only due to the halt on recruitment in Western Europe that the Yugoslav elite started to take the *Gastarbeiters'* possible return seriously. Even so, it was at the end of 1975 that the first program for the gradual return and reintegration of the *Gastarbeiters* was approved by the federal apparatus, and one year later, ratified at republic/province level.⁸ However, despite the declared priority of its implementation and the pressure on the local party sections to engage themselves into setting up the program, in most cases the program was never totally actuated and in some areas it even remained a dead letter.⁹

Parallel to this process, the return of the *Gastarbeiters* was a reality.¹⁰ The *Gastarbeiters* who were coming back with their savings and plans to invest them, had to face exhausting bureaucratic procedures and ambiguous attitudes.¹¹ In the political debate, the *Gastarbeiters* were, thanks to their savings, represented as economically appetizing and at the same time ideologically dangerous, because of their new “self-consciousness” developed in capitalistic countries. The compromise between the two faces of the same coin materialized in a series of measures, such as new customs duty, a new law on private investment and official authorization of the common, but unsanctioned practice of paying to get a job. Great emphasis was put on the possibilities within the little private sector,¹² although it continued to be difficult to get off the ground.¹³ In general, the scope left for the *Gastarbeiters'* self-initiative was extremely narrow.

Even after 1978, the situation did not improve, when on the boost of a renewed interest for the “*Gastarbeiter* question” in Europe, Denmark sent financial aid to Yugoslavia, which, through a newly-constituted federal fund for the *Gastarbeiters'* reintegration, was aimed at supporting *Gastarbeiters'* self-initiatives. Despite these incentives, the *Gastarbeiters'* investment in Yugoslavia, such as their return rate, continued to be of a fluctuating character.¹⁴ The situation further worsened in the first half of the 1980's, when frequent amendments to the regulation on earnings and on customs duty went often to the disadvantage of the *Gastarbeiters*, making profitable activity in Yugoslavia insecure.¹⁵

3. The Failure of the Programs for the Gradual Reintegration of the *Gastarbeiters*: a Lot of Money, but no Valid Project to Finance (1983–1991)

In the 1980s the Yugoslav policy for the reintegration of the *Gastarbeiters* became more and more dependent on foreign aid. Drastic inflation, currency devaluation, and the bankruptcy of big state-controlled enterprises in all productive sectors led to a deep economic crisis and massive unemployment.¹⁶ This situation not only considerably affected the possibility to offer returnees but also Yugoslav workers a job position. As a consequence, the on-going meetings to reach agreements between Yugoslavia and the host countries for joint-programs, the goal of which was the reintegration of the *Gastarbeiters* and the development of the underdeveloped areas, ended up subordinating the former goal to the latter.¹⁷

After the first cooperation agreement with Denmark, similar negotiations started with the principal European hosting countries (Sweden, France, Germany) and, most important, with the European Community. There were also initiatives (French and German) addressed directly to the *Gastarbeiters*, who received a granted money in cash if they decided to go back home.¹⁸ However, these collaborations were only partially successful. When, after long negotiations, Yugoslavia and the host country reached an agreement, several problems emerged during the realization. They were partly of bureaucratic nature: the long procedures which blocked projects in the administrative offices and the unclear division of responsibilities on local/national and federative levels often caused delay in project selection and in canceling existing projects.¹⁹

Other obstacles were of economic and structural nature: the lack of financial resources in the local administrations and the shortage of skilled cadres and workers, often determined the failure of the projects.²⁰ As a result, the money allocated for their implementation remained unemployed. The Yugoslav establishment decided to find a solution in taking the

gateway to privatization. Together with the opening to foreign investments, new legislation on private investment offered new perspectives to the *Gastarbeiters* as self-employed workers. However, the fact that the *Gastarbeiters* were from that point on strongly pushed to invest in associated labor enterprises limited the possibility to take profit from them for two main reasons. On the one hand, in most cases, state-owned companies went bankrupt without refunding their creditors. On the other hand, the *Gastarbeiters*, who did not lose their savings, lacked self-initiative and experience as businessmen.²¹

Those who were still of working age often re-emigrated, taking with them the family and leaving their houses empty, which represented the most visible investment the *Gastarbeiters* made at home. Furthermore, there is evidence that, since the end of the 1980s, part of the *Gastarbeiters'* investments and especially those of Serbian and Croatian Diaspora communities, was bound with patriotic tasks, such as financing the political campaign of nationalist leaders.²² In 1989 the war prelude and the block on investment to Yugoslavia decreed by the IMF (May–October 1989), made impracticable any proposal that would aim at reintegrating the *Gastarbeiters* in Yugoslavia.

4. Consequence of the Yugoslav Migration Policy on Returnees and Society

The failure (or absence) of a Yugoslav reintegration policy for the *Gastarbeiters* affected not only the (potential) returnees but also the Yugoslav society as a whole. The fact that the *Gastarbeiters* were (presumed) owners of capital played a crucial factor in determining not only the expectations of Yugoslav society and institutions regarding the *Gastarbeiters'* return but also their own expectations. The investment of their savings in productive activity was not only the price to pay for being re-accepted in society but also the necessary compensation for the sacrifice and privation suffered abroad.

As emerged in the several interviews of *Gastarbeiters* conducted by the *Centar za istraživanje migracije* in the 1970s and 1980s in Belgrade, Zagreb, and Sarajevo, when the *Gastarbeiters* came home for holidays, it showed that there was a widespread preparedness to return to Yugoslavia if a stable and permanent job at home was guaranteed. A good salary was not so important; they were aware that Yugoslav standards were lower, but this did not represent a real problem: not only was life cheaper in Yugoslavia, but it was also easier and more beautiful.²³ Those accounts demonstrate that *Gastarbeiters* were willing to invest their savings and experiences in Yugoslavia, if this meant that they did not have to leave again hearth and home.

However, to become an investor, the *Gastarbeiters'* savings necessitated the existence of some preconditions in the local community, such as the support of foreign technical and financial aid or, minimally, the local presence of thriving industry and specialized workers. The fact that the *Gastarbeiters'* productive investment, in particular in the form of the *Gastarbeiters* factories, occurred in significant proportions only in the 1960s and early 1970s, suggested that this period represented a “positive conjuncture”, which was difficult to emulate later. This was the result of different factors, which only in part depended on the Yugoslav policy towards the returnees.

On a macro level, the general worsening of labor conditions in Europe in the 1970s, which affected particularly foreign workers and hence also Yugoslav workers abroad, played an important role. However, focusing on Yugoslavia, it emerged that the structural problems of the Yugoslav system (such as overlapping of competence areas, unequal supply of financial and technical resources) limited the room for maneuvers for the *Gastarbeiters* and their reintegration into the local community. Therefore, the huge potential offered by the money and human capital of the *Gastarbeiters*, from which Yugoslav society as a whole could have benefited, was wasted and caused a sense of dissatisfaction and powerlessness, which oriented the *Gastarbeiters* towards flaunting personal luxury and contributed to pushing them toward a political orientation with an illicit and/or anti-systemic character.

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Notes

- 1 Due to the potentially vast scope of the task, the regional and national differences of the *Gastarbeiter* phenomenon within Yugoslavia will not be covered in this paper. For details on the different migration traditions on the Yugoslav region cf. Brunnbauer, Ulf (ed.): *Transnational Societies, Transterritorial Politics. Migration in the (Post-)Yugoslav Region, 19th–21st Century*. Munich: Oldenbourg 2009.
- 2 Körner, Heiko et al.: *Materialien zur Arbeitsmigration und Ausländerbeschäftigung. Vol. 2. Königstein/Ts.: Hanstein 1979*, pp. 51–54.
- 3 Haberl, Othmar Nikola: *Die Abwanderung von Arbeitskräften aus Jugoslawien. Zur Problematik ihrer Auslandsbeschäftigung und Rückführung*. München: R. Oldenbourg 1978, pp. 51–54.
- 4 Vuksanović, Gordana: *Na Putu do Kuće. Studija domaćinstvima i porodičnim odnosima povratnika sa rada u inostranstvu [Auf dem Weg heim. Studie über Haushalte und familiäre Beziehungen der Rückwanderer von kurzfristiger Arbeit im Ausland]*. Novi Sad: Odsek za sociologiju Filozofskog fakulteta 1997, p. 45.
- 5 Ivanović, Vladimir: *Jugoslovenski ekonomski emigranti na privremenom radu u Austriji i SR Nemačkoj (1965 – 1973). Doktorska disertacija [Jugoslawischen Wirtschaftsemigranten und ihre Gastarbeit in Österreich und der BRD (1965-1973). Doktorarbeit]*. Beograd: Filozofski Fakultet 2010, pp. 171–203.
- 6 Leković, Ananije: *Ugroženi Identitet [Bedrohte Identität]*. Beograd: Pres Kipling 1981, pp. 179–184.
- 7 Leković 1981, pp. 80–96.
- 8 *Mere za povratnika [Prozedur für Rückkehrer]*. In: *Ekonomika Politika*, 12.04.1976.
- 9 *Uz program i konkretne akcije [Mit dem Programm und konkreten Aktionen]*. In: *Borba*, 01.11.1976.
- 10 Since 1975, the return rate attested around 20 000 returnees per year. For more details cf. Vuksanović 1997, pp. 29–30; Baučić, Ivo: *Ne postoje povoljnija strana sredstva od sada neaktiviranih deviznih sredstava u vlasništvu jugoslovenskih gradjana [Es bestehen keine besseren fremden Mittel von jetzt nicht aktivierten Devisen im Besitz jugoslawischer Staatsbürger]*. In: *Korišćenje štednje gradjana na privremenom radu u inostranstvu za razvoj [Der Nutzen des Sparens von Bürgern bei der Arbeitsmigration ins Ausland]*. Beograd: Fond Federacije za kreditiranje brzog razvoja privredno nedovoljno razvijenih republika i autonomnih pokrajina 1988, pp. 39–44.
- 11 Numerous were the newspaper articles which denounced the difficulties the *Gastarbeiters* had to face with, after return. Cf. among others *Povratnici [Rückkehrer]*. In: *Borba*, 26.12.1976; *Marke se nude a partneri šute [Mark werden geboten, aber die Partner schweigen]*. In: *Vjesnik*, 24.02.1977; *Nemar pojedinica i službi [Faulheit des Einzelnen und der Behörden]*. In: *Borba*, 08.08.1977.
- 12 Numerous publication and newspaper articles have been written in Yugoslavia to promote the little private sector and to push the *Gastarbeiters* to invest in it. Cf. among others: *Povratak kući i osnivanje samostalne radnje [Rückkehr und Aufbau eines selbstständigen Geschäfts]*. Novi Sad: Novi Sad 1983; *Bliže Poslu u domovini [Der Arbeit im Heimatland näher]*. Novi Sad: Pokrajinski Sekretarijat za rad i Pokrajinski sekretarijat za informacije. December 1979; *Društveni ali i privatni sektor-šansa za zemljake [Gesellschaftlicher und privater Sektor – Chancen für Landsleute]*. In: *Vjesnik*, 18.08.1977.
- 13 Filipović, Snežana: *Analiza stanja i mogućnosti reintergracije radnika povratnika u jugoslovensku privrednu strukturu. Zbornik Matice Srpske za društvene nauke [Die Analyse der Möglichkeiten zur Reintegration der rückwandernden Arbeiter in die jugoslawische Wirtschaft]*. In: *Zbornik Matice Srpske za društvene nauke [Jahresschrift der Matica Srpska für Sozialwissenschaften] 1985*, pp. 40–42.
- 14 For details on the *Gastarbeiters'* remittances and investments in Yugoslavia cf. Žarković, Dragoje: *Omogućiti i stimulisati plaisranje ušteda u Jugoslaviji [Ermöglichung und Stimulierung des Sparens in Jugoslawien]*. In: *Korišćenje 1997*, pp. 26–31.
- 15 Vuksanović 1997, pp. 46 f.
- 16 Woodward, Susan: *Socialist Unemployment: the Political Economy of Yugoslavia (1945–1990)*. Princeton: Princeton UP 1995.
- 17 Filipović 1985, p. 38.
- 18 *Devize za povratnike [Devisen für Rückkehrer]*. In: *Politika*, 05.10.1986.
- 19 Filipović 1985, p. 48.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 Mikulić, Branislav: *Uticao savremenih migracija na razvoj zemalja porijekla [Der Einfluss der zeitgenössischen Migration auf die Entwicklung der Heimatländer. Europäische Erfahrungen]*. In: *Evropska iskustva. Ekonomski Pregled 10-12 (1990)*, pp. 437–462.
- 22 Hockenos, Paul: *Homeland Calling. Exile Patriotism and the Balkan Wars*. New York: Cornell UP 2003.
- 23 Baučić, Ivo/Groß, Bernd: *Rückkehr und Reintegration jugoslawischer Arbeitnehmer aus der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Deutsch-jugoslawische Untersuchung der Zukunftspläne jugoslawischer Arbeitsmigranten und ihrer Realisierung nach der Rückkehr. Endbericht einer empirischen Untersuchung im Auftrag des Bundesministers für Arbeit und Sozialordnung*. Bonn: Saarbrücken 1987.