

Labour Migration and Transnationalism in the Balkans.

A Historical Perspective

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Introduction

I want to start with the story of the Vucinich family, who emigrated from the Herzegovina to the United States at the beginning of the 20th century. Spiro, the father of Wayne Vucinich, who would become one of the founding fathers of East European history in America, came to the United States in 1900. He worked first in a copper mine in Butte, Montana, a town with a significant South Slavic migrant population. Later, he opened a grocery and liquor shop. Spiro Vucinich eventually earned enough money to bring two of his brothers and a number of other relatives from the Herzegovina to Montana. None of them, Wayne Vucinich writes in his memoirs, planned to remain in America permanently, all expecting to return home after accumulating some capital. Many, though, did not achieve this goal. Wayne Vucinich describes the prevailing attitude towards emigration in the native region of his father:

When male members of an extended family wished to leave home, they could sell their shares of the patrimony to those left behind. But such transactions were rare. Normally those absented themselves from the family – even so far away as Montana – retained their family rights and sent home some of their earnings. My father and his brothers in America retained their rights to the family patrimony, and from time to time, they sent money to their other brothers at home, Ivan and Rade, who remained at the family hearth. Ivan and Rade used the money to expand and improve the patrimony. [...] With money from America, Ivan and Rade were also able to build a family cistern, and to repair the family house.¹

Not all emigrants, however, were equally firm in their commitment when it came to providing support for their family back home. Vucinich writes that “one of my relatives never wrote home. Many years later he told me, ‘I would have written the family, but I lost their address.’” Vucinich does not fail to point out that there were no addresses in his relative’s native village at all.² The exchange between the emigrants in America and their native villages was not limited to money and letters, but it also included marital arrangements. Wayne’s mother, Sofia, came to America to marry his father, Spiro, who had never seen her before. She was noted for her beauty and intelligence. Most likely, it was her brother, a friend of Spiro’s, who had promoted the marriage. A cousin of Wayne’s father would escort the “mail-order bride” – in the words of Wayne Vucinich – to Butte.³

After World War One, some of the migrants from the former Habsburg territories, which were joined to the newly created Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes returned to the new state. They came with new habits from America:

Life in America and experience away from home had broadened their world outlook. So, instead of making their homes in the villages, most returnees established themselves in neighboring urban centers such as Bileća and Trebinje, where society seemed closer to the American style of life. They opened grocery stores, general stores, coffeeshops, or bars. Life in America had left a lasting influence on the returnees, and they could easily be recognized. They retained certain Americanisms in their diet, dress, and work. Their hats, watches, and gold teeth set them apart.⁴

Wayne Vucinich, who was born in the United States in 1913, also came to live in the native village of his father. He was sent to the Herzegovina by his uncle who had taken care of Wayne after his parents had succumbed to the Spanish flu in the autumn of 1918. His uncle and other relatives reasoned that the extended family in the native village of Wayne’s father would give better care to him and his two siblings. So they “returned” to a country where they had never been. They did not arrive penniless, though: their father had accumulated some property from which they were to receive installments of \$100 monthly – a quite significant amount of money in Yugoslavia at that time.⁵

This story provides insight into several important features of overseas emigration from the Balkans, particularly into the nature of the trans-Atlantic links which it conditioned. Pre-World War One migration from the Balkans resulted in family arrangements, which crossed the Atlantic. Migrants continued to be a member of the household in their native village and contributed to its wellbeing. The traditional practice of arranged marriage was

continued – though women now had to travel longer distances. The resources of the trans-Atlantic extended family could be mobilized at both of its ends: in the Herzegovina, when care was warranted for returning migrants or marriages were to be arranged; in America, for the accumulation of money to be sent home and for the support of newly arriving immigrants. A particularly important motive for the maintenance of close emotional, and in many cases also material ties between the emigrants and their families was their wish to return: migrants continued to be members of their community back home in the expectation that they would live there again. And those who did return, brought a piece of America to the Herzegovina inspiring the imagination (and envy) of the local population.

I quote the Vucinich family story in detail also because of its many parallels to the experiences of the post-World War Two *Gastarbeiter* migration: such as the salience of labor migration, the wish to return, the sending of money to the family, the investment by migrants in family property, and the significance of cross-border family arrangements – these are continuities between what Michael Palaret has called the “new” and the “newest” emigration from the Balkans.⁶ Many of these practices can be considered as transnational, to use a concept, which has risen to prominence in migration studies during the last decade.

In this paper, I want to highlight the usefulness of a transnational perspective – and its specific epistemology – for Balkan history on the one hand, the contribution that evidence from the Balkans can make to the discussion of important issues of migrant transnationalism on the other hand. I will briefly discuss the following problems:

1. transnationalism as an innovative paradigm for the history of the Balkans,
2. the question of the allegedly novel character of transnationalism,
3. the dimensions of transnationalism in the Balkans,
4. the role of the state,
5. the problem of terminology.

1. Transnationalism and Balkan Migration History

The historiography of the Balkans benefits enormously from the application of a transnational perspective, which helps to overcome the predominance of the national perspective. History in Southeastern Europe is often written as a self-contained teleology in which the nation is the unquestioned frame of action and reference. Historical attention is mainly devoted to the idiosyncrasies of the nation. A transnational perspective, in contrast, redirects attention to the entanglements and transfers that characterize and constitute the phenomena of historical research (this applies also to the nation, as a subject matter of research). Such an approach engenders a new epistemology, which views socio-political and cultural processes as relational categories which cannot be understood by a hermeneutics of separation. Nothing is in itself; everything is in its relatedness.

Of course, the history of migration can and should be a primary field for the empirical application of the transnational approach. As historian Holm Sundhaussen has frequently noted, migration is a characteristic feature of Balkan societies in past and present.⁷ Various waves and different patterns of migration changed the social and linguistic configuration of the Balkans and re-made social spaces. International – as well as domestic – migration is a social *longue durée* process in the Balkans. In the 19th and 20th centuries, many an emigrant from the Balkans – be it an economic migrant or a refugee – would maintain close involvements with his or her former home society, thus creating social fields of action which crossed state borders. Only recently, historical research on the Balkans began to explore these cross-border links and the migrant’s transnational life-worlds, and their impact on the societies ‘at home’.⁸ In general, the migration history of the Balkans has not yet found comprehensive treatment. This is, however, required because of the significance of the phenomenon and also, because a focus on migration will help understand the relational and entangled character of Balkan societies.

2. Transnationalism: a New Phenomenon?

When, in the early 1990s, social scientists discovered the concept of transnationalism in migration research they assumed the novelty of the phenomenon.⁹ This was also due to the

epistemology of their disciplines, while historians are inclined to believe that there is nothing new under the sun. In fact, historians working on immigrants to the United States showed that processes which scholars now call transnational have a long history. Nancy Foner, e.g., revealed in her study of immigration to New York that already at the turn of the 19th and the 20th century there were lively debates in the U.S. about the connections which migrants were maintaining with their home country.¹⁰ In these discussions the term “transnational” appeared first in a 1916 essay by Rudolph Bourne on *Transnational America*.¹¹

Migrants, who left Southeastern (and Southern and Eastern) Europe for the United States before 1914, established various cross-border connections with their homelands: they remained attached to their families, they sent money home, they became involved in hometown associations, and many of them eventually returned. Especially from Italy, a significant number of laborers made the journey to the U.S. and back every year. The public in their home countries was intensely aware of the emigrants who were regarded as a temporarily dislocated part of the nation. Migration, thus, was an important element of the process which Sebastian Conrad and other historians call a first wave of “globalization” – not only in terms of actual global movements of goods and people but also of an emerging consciousness of the globalized nature of the world.¹²

Thus, the experience of transnationalism was not new to emigrants from the Balkans. Nevertheless, the quality of these links did change after World War Two, first in the context of the *Gastarbeiter* migration, as many a labor migrant from Yugoslavia went to Austria and Southern Germany, from where they could easily and frequently travel back home; later due to the revolutions in communication technology and the fall of transportation costs. These developments increased the likelihood of migrants maintaining close and multi-dimensional relationships with their home country because the costs and difficulties of such practices were greatly reduced; though it is necessary to note that many a migrant did not pursue such links.

Another factor might have played role: post-1945 migrants left with consolidated national identities and, in the European context, they were usually treated as temporary migrants by the accepting countries; some of the destination countries actively discouraged assimilation and integration, thus maintaining the identification of migrants with the home country. Germany is the most notorious example. For migrant families it was a reasonable strategy to place their bet in both countries and to make investment decisions accordingly. The wish to return, prevalent among many *Gastarbeiters*, was also an important factor in their attempt to maintain close links with their home country to which they believed they would eventually come back.

3. Dimensions of Transnationalism

The areas of transnational practices of migrants from the Balkans are similar to what has been shown for migrants from other regions. The main realms in which cross-border links are of importance are the economy, family and kin relations, hometown associations, and politics.

From an economic point of view, migrant remittances and repatriated savings made a significant contribution to regional economies and national balances of payments already before World War One. So-called “passive” regions in Greece, Dalmatia, and coastal Croatia, e.g., and many an Adriatic island depended on remittances from emigrants as early as by the end of the 19th century. The current account deficits of interwar Greece and Yugoslavia were alleviated by money from the emigrants, and after World War Two remittances and savings of *Gastarbeiters* from these two countries constituted a significant source of the national income. Today, remittances amount to ten percent and more of the Gross Domestic Product in most Southeast European countries. In Moldova, remittances constituted twenty-four percent of the GDP in 2009, which is the highest rate for Europe and the fourth highest in the world.¹³ Then and now, these remittances and repatriated savings are mainly used for household consumption – building new homes, purchasing land and durable consumer goods, spending money on lavish weddings or for tuition fees. In a word: remittances do play an important role in raising household living standards in a domestic economic environment of low wages and high (under-)unemployment. The consequences of the access to economic resources abroad also turned such families and emigrants into role models which inspired emulation. Cross-border links, thus, were a source of local prestige and status.¹⁴ As

the spending of remittances indicates, the family is a primary realm of transnational practices. The story of Wayne Vucinich's family already revealed that many a pre-World War One emigrant from the Balkans remained part of his or – much more rarely – her family. The underlying family strategy was that one or more male members of the family went abroad for a couple of years to earn enough money so their household was able to buy additional land and other goods. A similar motivation was evident in case of the *Gastarbeiter*s. Since the stays of *Gastarbeiter* migrants were often prolonged, questions such as the place of schooling of the offspring were important decisions which significantly influenced the long-term spatial arrangements of the family.¹⁵

A third important area of transnationalism was politics. Long-distance nationalism was evident already in the 19th century. During both World Wars, émigré circles mobilized support for their beleaguered or occupied home countries and put forward ideas for the future (such as the unification of Yugoslavia in World War One). In the context of the dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia emigrants became diasporas which played an important role for financing nationalist movements and war efforts, and also for lobbying for their imagined home country in the country of residence; the presumed native countries also appealed for their help.¹⁶ In Croatia, these activities earned naturalized emigrants from Croatia (and also the Croats of the Herzegovina) even the right to vote.

Diaspora is conceptualized here in a similar way as suggested by Rogers Brubaker, who argues that “as a category of practice, ‘diaspora’ is used to make claims, to articulate projects, to formulate expectations, to mobilize energies, to appeal to loyalties”.¹⁷ An important factor for intensifying homeland-related political activities by emigrants has been the internet. The World Wide Web is, e.g., a major arena of nationalist articulation of the contentious stances towards the Macedonian question. The investigation of the role of the blogo-sphere for nation-building, yet, is still in its infancy; here, the boundaries between migrant and native actors also merge.¹⁸ What the transnational perspective on migration also allows is to draw new comparisons between (voluntary) migrants and refugees because both groups are engaged in practices which are directed towards their former home country. For the former Yugoslavia, this is a most pertinent issue, e.g. the reconstruction of the mainly Muslim town of Kozarac after the war in Bosnia, which was mainly funded with money from refugees, is a case in point. It evinces the development of a transnational identity and home-orientation among refugees, who nevertheless do not return for good. The transnational lens, thus, opens new vistas at divergent notions of home.

4. Transnationalism and the State

One important player in the field of transnational connections, esp. with regard to their political dimension, is the state. The Balkans provide ample evidence that governments responded to the emergence of transnational social practices by designing policies which were aimed at extending sovereignty across borders, so that the social and political spaces of the nation would coincide. Therefore, we need to explore the politics of emigration and citizenship of the sending states to understand the extent to which government actions influenced transnational social networks.¹⁹ Already in pre-1914 Croatia, e.g., politicians in the Croatian Diet (*sabor*) discussed ways of how the state could retain the loyalty of emigrants. A proposed Croatian Law on Emigration in 1910 described as one of its aims to maintain the “love” of the emigrants for their homeland. So, there was the political intention to create a diaspora.

Apart from the issue of loyalty and identification, states were also interested in utilizing the economic potential of emigrants; this often contradicted the official rhetoric demanding emigrants to return as the country depended on remittances, that is, on the non-return of emigrants. Socialist Yugoslavia is a case in point which designed various – and ultimately unsuccessful – mechanisms to channel money from the migrants in “productive” investments.²⁰ Today, national governments, the World Bank and other development agencies attempt to stimulate migrants to invest savings in business operations and local development. Actually, many a village in the emigration regions of the Balkans received modern communal facilities thanks to their emigrants over the last hundred years. Native migration experts, though, reckon that remittances might have had also a retarding effect on the economy.

It is impossible to detail all the different policies of Southeast European governments towards ‘their’ emigrants in the last century in this paper due to limitations of space (and due

to the fact that these policies have not yet been comprehensively investigated). In most cases, this relationship could be very ambiguous (e.g., illustrated by the differentiating attitudes of socialist Yugoslavia towards the so-called “old” and the “hostile” emigrations). In general, however, Balkan states aimed at supporting the links which ‘their’ emigrants were maintaining with their home countries, which made the emergence of migrant transnational practices more likely. Such measures included identitarian policies attempting to prevent assimilation of emigrants into the host society’s culture and to extend domestic nation-building upon the emigrants. This was pertinent especially in cases in which emigrants had left without a consolidated national identity. Governments in the Balkans sometime projected nation-building efforts across state borders. Hence the attempts of interwar and socialist Yugoslavia to ‘Yugoslavize’ migrants, or the competition between Macedonia, Bulgaria and Greece for the loyalty of emigrants from Macedonia.²¹ During the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the wars of the 1990s, national governments approached emigrants, who had become to be considered a diaspora that would mobilize for the wellbeing of their imaginary ‘home country’.²²

States, thus, often provide institutional arrangements and political incentives which facilitate the maintenance of links by the emigrants with their home communities and the polities ‘back home’. The nation was not only imagined as a transnational one including also the folks living somewhere else, but nationalist policies did attempt to render such notions a social reality. Transnationalism, therefore, does not ring the death-knell for nation states because nation states have the power to shape, manipulate, and delimit transnational practices, as Nadjie Al-Ali and Khalid Koser argue.²³ We, therefore, need to analyze the complicated relations between ‘transnationalism from above’ and ‘from below’.

5. Conceptual Problems

The active role of states in forging transnational ties, and the nationalist potential of such linkages point to conceptual problems; this is the last point which I want to raise. In the case of Balkan migrants, but also of other migrant communities, ‘transnational’ practices could be national(ist) indeed, in two senses:

First, the cross-border connections usually linked members of the same nation. In the Balkans, where since the late 19th century nations were predominantly defined in ethnic terms, the nation as an imagined community always had a cross-border potential. It was the assumption of common descent and of shared culture, not shared territory and citizenship which substantiated notions of national belonging.²⁴ Actually, from the very beginning of their existence the nation states in the Balkans laid claim to people outside their borders and developed strategies to extend sovereignty, e.g., by providing schooling for the ‘oppressed brethren’ abroad or, in the final instance, by occupying foreign territories. In similar fashion, emigrants were also considered to remain part of the nation, wherever they were living. This was no Balkan specificity, as other nations who had experienced significant overseas emigration in the 19th and early 20th century, such as the Polish, Italian or German ones, were also imagined in a transterritorial way.²⁵ Nations were seen as “unbound” already at that time and not only in late capitalism, as Linda Green Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Szanton Blanc seem to presume.²⁶

Second, therefore, cross-border links were often used for nationalist purposes by both the sending country or its institutions, and parts of the emigrants. Hence, the somewhat implicit implication that ‘transnationality’ transcends the nation needs qualification. Transnational – in the sense of trans-state – links can rather be a resource for the pursuit of a nationalist agenda. In a region, where state and nation are not conterminous and the boundaries of the nation are not predicated upon state borders, the concept of ‘transnational’ can therefore subsume national but at the same time cross-border links. This ambivalence is also evident in the difficulties to render the concept ‘transnational’ into German, in which nation and state are also not congruent. We, therefore, might think about replacing the term with alternatives, such as ‘trans-territorial’ or ‘trans-state’.

Conclusion

I want to conclude this brief discussion of the virtues and problems of the paradigm of transnationalism for the analysis of the Balkan migration experience by stressing that, despite

my above mentioned quibbles, the transnational approach is very fruitful for understanding not only the migration history of the Balkans but also for the re-conceptualization of the history of the region. Of course, we must be aware that not all, or probably not even the majority of migrants, were really engaged in transnational networks. These cross-border links might also weaken over time and especially from generation to generation. Transnationalism must not be essentialized but we rather have to look for differences of class, gender, age, context, time, and of a variety of other, often contingent factors. 'Transnational', thus, should not be used only as an apt concept to describe and analyze certain empirical phenomena. It also means a certain perspective from which to approach the subject matters.

A transnational (or whatever 'trans' entity) approach challenges the dominant national-history perspective, which in the Balkans more often than not comes not only in the form of methodological, yet also political nationalism. It is important to highlight the essentially entangled and trans-regional nature of the history of the Balkans and of the practices of its migrant and non-migrant populations.

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Notes

- 1 Vucinich, Wayne S.: *Memoirs of My Childhood in Yugoslavia*. Ed. by Larry Wolff. Palo Alto/CA.: The Society for the Promotion of Science and Scholarship 2007, p. 3.
- 2 Vucinich 2007, p. 7.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid., p. 5f.
- 5 Ibid., p. 10.
- 6 Palaret, Michael: *The 'New' Immigration and the Newest. Slavic Migrations from the Balkans to America and Industrial Europe since the Late Nineteenth Century*. In: Smout, Thomas C. (Ed.): *The Search for Wealth and Stability. Essays in Economic and Social History presented to Flinn, M.W.* London: Macmillan 1979, pp. 43–65.
- 7 Sundhaussen, Holm: *Geschichte Südosteuropas als Migrationsgeschichte. Eine Skizze*. In: *Südostforschungen* 65–66 (2006/07), pp. 422–477.
- 8 Cf., e.g., Spiliotis, Susanne-Sophia: *Transterritorialität und nationale Abgrenzung. Konstitutionsprozesse der griechischen Gesellschaft und Ansätze ihrer faschistoiden Transformation, 1922/24–1941*. Munich: Oldenbourg 1998; Brunnbauer, Ulf (ed.): *Transnational Societies, Transterritorial Politics. Migrations in the (Post-)Yugoslav Region, 19th–21st Century*. Munich: Oldenbourg 2009a; Brunnbauer, Ulf/Novinščak, Karolina/Voss, Christian (eds.): *Gesellschaften in Bewegung. Emigration aus und Immigration nach Südosteuropa in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*. In: *Südosteuropa-Jahrbuch* 38 (2011).
- 9 For a discussion of this assumption cf. Al-Ali, Nadje/Koser, Khalid: *New Approaches to Migration? Transnational Communities and the Transformation of Home*. Milton Park: Routledge 2002a.
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- 11 Bourne, Randolph: *Trans-National America*. In: *Atlantic Monthly* 118 (July 1916), pp. 86–97.
- 12 Conrad, Sebastian: *Globalisierung und Nation im Deutschen Kaiserreich*. München: C.H. Beck 2006.
- 13 World Bank: *Migration and Remittances Factbook 2011*. Washington D.C.: World Bank, 2010. Summary at: <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPROSPECTS/Resources/334934-1199807908806/World.pdf> (last access: November 27, 2010).
- 14 Schierup, Carl-Ulrik: *Houses, Tractors, Golden Ducats. Prestige Game and Migration. A Study of Migrants to Denmark from a Yugoslav Village*. Field Report. Århus: Institut for Etnografi og Socialantropologi Moesgård, Århus Univ.

- 1973; Tani, Živan: Seljaci na evropskim raskrscima. Analiza ekonomskih migracija. Belgrade: Inst. društvenih nauka 1974.
- 15 Čapo Žmegač, Jasna: Spanning National Borders. Split Lives of Croatian Migrant Families. In: Migracijske i etničke teme 23/1-2 (2007), pp. 33-49.
- 16 Cf. Hockenos, Paul: Homeland Calling. Exile Patriotism and the Balkan Wars. New York: Cornell UP 2003.
- 17 Brubaker, Rogers: The 'Diaspora' Diaspora. In: Ethnic and Racial Studies 28/1 (2005), p. 12. – The impact of independence of the former republics and war on ex-Yugoslav migrant populations has also already become subject of research, cf. e.g. Winland, Daphne: We Are Now an Actual Nation. The Impact of National Independence on the Croatian Diaspora in Canada. In: Diaspora 4/1 (1995), pp. 3-30; Povrzanović Frykman, Maja: Homeland Lost and Gained: Croatian Diaspora and Refugees in Sweden. In: Nadjie Al-Ali, Khalid Koser (eds.): New Approaches to Migration? Transnational Communities and the Transformation of Home. Milton Park: Routledge 2002, pp. 118-137; Bock-Luna, Birgit: The Past in Exile. Serbian Long-Distance Nationalism and Identity in the Wake of the Third Balkan War. Berlin: Lit 2007.
- 18 Cf. Brkovi, Čarna: Floating Signifiers. Negotiations of the National on the Internet Forum Café del Montenegro. In: Südosteuropa 59 (2009), pp 55-69; Tokić, Ruža: Identitätenbildung im Internet – Die makedonische Diaspora als transnationales Netzwerk. In: Brunnbauer/Novinščak/Voss 2011, pp. 251-263.
- 19 The history and politics of emigration have received much less attention than the ones of immigration. For a comparative discussion of the significance of emigration policies cf. Green/Weil 2007.
- 20 Brunnbauer, Ulf: Labour Emigration from the Yugoslav Area from the late 19th Century until the End of Socialism. Continuities and Changes. In: Brunnbauer, Ulf (ed.): Transnational Societies, Transterritorial Politics. Migration in the (Post-) Yugoslav Region, 19th–21st Century. Munich: Oldenbourg 2009b; Ragazzi, Francesco: The Croatian 'Diaspora Politics' of the 1990s. Nationalism Unbound? In: Brunnbauer 2009a, pp. 145-168.
- 21 Cf. Danforth, Loring M.: The Macedonian Conflict. Ethnic Nationalism in a Transnational World. Princeton: Princeton UP 1995.
- 22 Hockenos 2003.
- 23 Al-Ali, Nadjie/Koser, Khalid: Transnationalism, Migration and Home. In: Al-Ali/Koser 2002, pp. 1-15.
- 24 The extensive American literature on migrant transnationalism departs from the idea that modern nationalism "was to make space and identity coincide", cf. Vertovec, Steven/Cohen, Robin: Introduction. In: Vertovec, Steven/Cohen, Robin (eds.): Migration, Diasporas and Transnationalism. Celtenham, Northampton/MA 1999, p. xxii. Only based on such a notion does 'transnationalism' acquire its nationalism-transcending quality.
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- 26 Green Basch, Linda/Glick Schiller, Nina/Szanton Blanc, Cristina: Nations Unbound. Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-states. London: Routledge 2003 [1st edition 1994], p. 8.

