

Intra-Yugoslav Migration of Albanian Workers and Shopkeepers from 1953 to 1989 – An Interview with Rory Archer and Mladen Zobec

Thursday 5 October 2023, by [ARCHER Rory](#), [JUHÁSZ András](#), [ZOBEC Mladen](#) (Date first published: 31 August 2023).

Why did many Albanians work in the private sector in socialist Yugoslavia? How did the state treat small entrepreneurs and migrating seasonal workers? We discussed these and similar questions with researchers from the Centre for Southeast European Studies.

After a public lecture organised by the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory in Belgrade, Rory Archer and Mladen Zobec agreed to give an interview for Mašina on their ongoing research entitled “To the Northwest! Intra-Yugoslav Albanian Migration (1953-1989)”.

Dr Rory Archer is a social historian of 20th century Southeast Europe. He is the Principal Investigator of “To the Northwest!” at the Centre for Southeast European Studies, University of Graz, and his research focuses on Albanian migration to Croatia. His previous research has focused on labour and gender history in socialism, housing, everyday life and popular culture.

Mladen Zobec is a sociologist and a PhD candidate at the University of Graz. He works as a researcher for “To the Northwest!” His dissertation focuses on Albanian migration to socialist Slovenia with an emphasis on migrant crafts and businesses, exploring how they relate to the Yugoslav socialist modernity. More broadly his research interests focus on the social and political history of socialist Yugoslavia.

As the researchers state on their [website](#), “Despite the large number of studies examining the experiences of Albanian migrants in countries such as Greece, Italy and Switzerland (and the impact of migration in the towns and villages of Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia), a crucial part of the story is missing”.

Throughout the interview we will learn about many aspects of this missing part of the story as we explore with Mladen and Rory the case of Albanian labour migration from south-east Yugoslavia to the north-west of the country, Croatia and Slovenia.

Archer and Zobec point out that their research is based on the analysis of library and archival documents and extensive oral history interviews.

As I prepared for this interview and read the texts you published on the To the Northwest! website, the stories about confectioners and ice-cream makers reminded me of the shop I loved most as a child in my village in Serbia. It was an ice-cream parlour run by a kind man, probably my grandfather’s peer. Everyone in the village knew him, and everyone called him - I have no idea why - by his father’s name, Beshir. He was from Tetovo and

opened his shop in this village in the late 1950s. Your research focuses on Croatia and Slovenia, but first can you comment on how common or unusual it would have been to find a pastry shop run by a person of Albanian origin in the towns and villages of socialist Yugoslavia?

Rory Archer: I think it would have been very common. Judging from the sources, it's kind of ubiquitous. I mean, one of the reasons why this project was developed was because it's so common that someone from an Albanian background, actually almost always from Macedonia and from the Tetovo region, would have had an ice cream shop as early as the 1950s or 1960s, all over Yugoslavia. In our research we're looking at Slovenia and Croatia, but I think this would have been the case even in very remote parts of Yugoslavia.

Mladen Zobec: I'm most familiar with the Slovenian context, so I'll speak about that. Even by the shop owners' own account, there was practically no town, no matter how small, that didn't have a pastry shop or at least an ice-cream stand that was owned by an Albanian. To a certain extent, there's also a certain logic to it, in the sense that when businesses spread, they spread through relatives, new businesses were being opened with the help of already established businesses of brothers or uncles or acquaintances. And of course, if a new shop was to be opened, it had to be opened somewhere so that it didn't compete with the already established shops. The easiest thing to do was just to go to the next town.

Rory: Our research focuses on the period after the Second World War, the period of socialism. But actually, when we started talking to people and doing oral history interviews – biographical accounts of lives – it was very common for people to talk more historically about their family experiences, going back to the interwar period. A lot of people had businesses in interwar Bucharest, in Romania and in other parts of the Balkan peninsula. So this is something that is also an older tradition.

Mladen: Just a side note. Rory and I are focusing on Croatia and Slovenia. These two destinations were probably the most attractive because of the higher standard of living and the higher purchasing power. So there was, let's say, a higher demand for these shops. I met a couple of confectioners who initially opened shops in Bosnia and Herzegovina because the presence of Islam there provided cultural similarities that were important to the migrating business owners and their families. But later they decided to move to either Croatia or Slovenia because it was just much easier to run a business in the richer republics.

The confectionery, jewellery and other shops were privately owned. What was it that led people of Albanian nationality to work in the private sector in Yugoslavia – a country where social ownership and workers' self-management were the norm?

Mladen: There is no doubt that Albanian entrepreneurs are over-represented in the private sector. So if you just look at the private businesses that existed in Slovenia, for example, in the first decades after the Second World War, you'll see that there aren't many other migrant businesses owned by people from Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia and so on. There were also, mostly in the later decades of socialist Yugoslavia, a lot of Albanians who migrated as manual workers, working in manufacturing, construction, in the mines and so on.

Rory: But even these workers would still be over-represented in the private sector because much of the work they did was informal. Sometimes they would have been subcontracted by the social sector. So I would say that, generally speaking, Albanians were much more represented in the private sector within socialist Yugoslavia as a whole. I think there's a number of socio-economic and political reasons for that.

What were the socio-economic and political reasons for the over-representation of Albanians in the private sector?

Rory: I haven't put it in writing yet, but in the accounts of individual people we've spoken to, this entrepreneurship is a kind of tradition, they say it's the way business has been done and they want to continue doing it.

I think politically there was a kind of disengagement from the state. Kosovo was under martial law until 1966, until the Brioni Plenum. And I think the people in Macedonia lived under similar conditions to those in Kosovo. People felt excluded from the benefits of socialist modernity and were more inclined to work in the private sector, which was legal, whatever the rules and limits.

And then there's the argument that these businesses fill in the gaps that the more cumbersome social sector hasn't always taken care of. So there's Ana Kladnik's work on Velenje as a kind of model settlement, but there are still gaps in the provision of certain services, which could then be filled by private businesses and workers in the private sector.

Tourism, I think, is another important sector in this respect. Because, of course, private companies can be much more agile than the social sector. So there's a kind of economic logic to it, because it was allowed, it was legally possible, if not always morally commendable in the eyes of the authorities.

Mladen: One of the reasons for working in the private sector that comes up in the interviews is the autonomy that the private sector offers: not having to rely on a state that does not trust you and a state that you do not trust. You could manage this mutual distrust by avoiding relying on the state for employment.

Another aspect worth mentioning is the pressure that many of the business owners felt from UDBA (State Security Service) and the authorities in general. Just the other day I was transcribing an interview in which I asked a confectioner from the Slovenian coast about his father's experience with the UDBA. He began to explain how the confectioners themselves contributed to the suspicion of the secret service because they never really moved to Slovenia permanently, but stayed in Macedonia and kept their centre of life there. Many of them would not invest in a house in Slovenia, but would rather build huge houses and buy land in Macedonia. According to the confectioner I spoke to, this kind of behaviour made the authorities suspicious.

On the face of it, it's a strange answer to the question of why they were harassed by the authorities. Because they built a house in Macedonia and not in Slovenia? So what does that mean? I think the answer suggests a kind of suspicion towards Albanians, especially those in the private sector and business owners, because they did not jump on the train of socialist modernisation by becoming a typical proletarian worker or by moving to an apartment in an urban environment. Instead, even second or third generation migrant workers and shopkeepers chose to stick to tradition and invest in housing and agriculture in rural Macedonia.

Rory: I'd like to add that the interviews we conducted show values and ideas associated with hard work. Quite often people talked about working 24 hours a day, or said 'we work much harder than those in the social sectors, and in difficult conditions'. Other times they describe their work as similar to that of miners, because they have to get up very early, spend a lot of time in front of hot ovens and do everything by hand. So there is still a kind of emphasis on the value of embodied labour, but also coming at it from a different perspective.

You mentioned that the authorities, and the UDBA in particular, were keeping an eye on

Albanian workers and shopkeepers in the private sector. Have you been able to explore this issue further?

Rory: I've looked at the archives of the Croatian secret police, which have been opened and are largely accessible. We have to remember that in late Yugoslav socialism the security services were also quite decentralised. So I'm sure that if it were possible to look at the records of the Serbian secret police, which is not the case at the moment, we would probably have a different story. What you can see in the Croatian records is that the position of the Albanians in Croatia changed overnight in 1981.

Before the student demonstrations in Pristina in the spring of 1981, there were about eight Albanians in the records of the Croatian secret police. But the demonstrations in Pristina were interpreted as nationalist and irredentist, and in the following years the number of Albanians in the files rose to thousands. The level of attention paid to the Albanians from the spring of 1981 until the dissolution of Yugoslavia was very high, certainly higher than I expected.

Mladen: We are also trying to see and explain how there may have been different attitudes between different authorities. So there was not necessarily a single policy towards the Albanians, rather, there were tensions within the state apparatus. So I have two accounts, one from the early socialist period and one from the later period.

The first is from the archives. In the early socialist period, Albanian confectioners were treated as southerners, not really welcome to do business in Slovenia, because they were seen by local bureaucrats as unhygienic, unreliable, lazy. These are all phrases I have come across in the official documents.

But often shopkeepers who complained to higher republican authorities were successful. Especially if they presented their case in terms that were perceived in line with socialist values. For example: "Why can't I get a licence to support my family with my work? Isn't it in the interest and value of socialism that every man and his family should be able to survive by their work" and so on.

Such arguments often worked in the early socialist period, and the republican authorities were, according to my findings, much more receptive to the appeals and arguments of Albanian shopkeepers than the local municipalities.

The second example is the story of a confectioner who was approached by the secret police in the 1980s. He felt pressured and responded by going to the local party branch and saying to the secretary: 'Listen, I am being harassed by the secret service. If I have done something wrong, please arrest me. If I haven't done anything wrong, please intervene.' And the harassment stopped. But of course not everyone felt confident enough to intervene in this way. Nevertheless, this case suggests that there were ways of negotiating and navigating between different instances of power in order to avoid harassment.

What were the links between migrating Albanian shop owners and workers? Did they have formal or informal support networks? Where were the dividing lines and what role did solidarity play?

Rory: There were many informal networks, mainly through family, place of origin, community. These connections were important, for example, for labour. People didn't usually advertise, they recruited workers by word of mouth or through family and kinship networks or from their home towns and villages.

Mladen: It's hard to imagine now, having talked to so many people, that someone would set up a business all on their own. It was always a network of relatives, friends, fellow villagers that you could rely on to help you get the know-how, the resources and so on. There were these kinds of connections and you can call them networks in a sense. But we should also be careful how we approach this question in order to avoid the damaging stereotypes of well-connected, conspiring Albanians.

Rory: And I think it's also important to stress that there were very deep internal divisions. There are huge divisions in terms of religion, whether you're Catholic or Muslim, in terms of social class, whether people are property and business owners or day labourers.

Day labourers are probably the largest single group, at least in the Croatian Adriatic. These are the people who worked informally, often in construction, and depended on selling their labour by the day or for short periods of time. There are very few sources on the lives of these people. And it's not always clear whether they had solidarity or support from the wider Albanian community, because of class and other divisions.

For example, when I spoke to business owners whose families came from a town like Prizren or Gjakovë/Đakovica in Kosovo, I didn't find any sense of solidarity with the casual worker who came from another part of Kosovo or from Macedonia.

It's the same with the place of origin and the level of integration. Those who came to places on the Adriatic coast like Pula, Poreč or Rovinj in the 1950s can see themselves as different from those who came in the 1970s or 80s, as already integrated into society and perceiving themselves as local, Mediterranean people.

Divisions and connections could also revolve around occupation. So there might be informal networks among ice-cream sellers or people in the hospitality industry, but then there'd be other sets of networks that would work among jewellers or souvenir sellers. So all these networks could be quite separate at times and perhaps even in slight conflict with each other, but then at another time or place they could overlap.

You mentioned that sources on the lives of Albanian migrant workers are scarce. How much can we know about these construction workers and others who, as you mentioned, are not employed in the social sector?

Rory: I find this the most challenging aspect of the research, because these are the people about whom there are the fewest sources available. Some of the better reports are from Croatian newspapers in the 1980s, which were investigating the phenomenon of Albanian day labourers in places like Split or Poreč.

There was a tendency in Croatia in the late 1980s to write stories about Albanians in a more sympathetic way, maybe a bit patronising at times, but still trying to understand people on their own terms, and some journalists would talk to a lot of day labourers. But in general, it's very hard to find sources about this. It's also hard to do oral history because a lot of time has passed and people have done a lot of other things in their lives.

For example, I've tried to do oral history in Kosovo by talking to people in a focus group interview setting. And in their case, they were working informally through a third party for the gas system of Osijek in Croatia in the late 1980s. The gas company was within the social sector, but the collective agreement of these Albanian migrant workers was not. They were essentially outsourced. They would usually work for three months and then go back to where they came from, which in this case

was Uroševac/Ferizaj. But in fact, they recall relatively little of their time working in Croatia – a lot of happened since the late 1980s, both in their own lives and in the wider community, and this was but one small period for them.

What can you tell us about the integration of Albanian families into Croatian and Slovenian society during the decades of socialism in Yugoslavia?

Rory: In the case of Croatia, I would say, based on the sources and the evidence, that it wasn't always unproblematic, but the people who settled there spoke mostly in positive terms about integration into the local community. When you ask more specific questions, like what happened after 1981, then you get more nuance. After the demonstrations in Kosovo, the Yugoslav press started to portray Albanians as irredentists or separatists, including in Croatia.

In general, there was a rise of a balkanist or orientalist discourse in Croatia at that time, a growing emphasis on being Central European, on being different from the eastern parts of Yugoslavia. You could see this in the local press. For example, in the 1980s Poreč had the highest proportion of Albanians in Croatia. The press there wrote that the many Albanian-owned shops on the main street were taking the town away from its Venetian past and "making it look like Istanbul". So there was anti-Albanian sentiment, casual prejudice.

Today, Albanians in Croatia tend to say that they feel part of the community, that Croatia is their home. However, some will also say that there is a level of discrimination. The situation in Croatia has certainly improved in the 2000s. Institutionally, there are very developed structures, probably much more than in Slovenia, in terms of including Albanians as an official national minority, in decision-making and representation and so on.

Mladen: I would add that in terms of integration during the socialist period, although there was a clear lack of Albanian representation in the party and in the state institutions, integration was sometimes quite high in the local communities, in the sense that local business owners were familiar faces in the neighbourhood or in the town, because they supported humanitarian programmes and helped with other local issues.

Could you talk about the period of the dissolution of Yugoslavia? What was life like for Albanians in the places you researched in the early 1990s?

Rory: This could be the subject of a whole study, because it's a fast-changing and confusing issue.

Albanian migration to Croatia was taking place largely under the radar of the authorities until 1981. It wasn't very well documented or studied by sociologists. Then, in the 1980s the migration of Albanians became securitized and was presented as a threat to the Yugoslav state.

Towards the end of the 1980s there was a kind of "discovery" of Albanians and their culture in local communities in a more sympathetic way. With the multi-party elections in Croatia in 1990, you suddenly had Albanian parties on the ballot. The Albanians became quite politically organised and acted very quickly. And this is a group of people who were criticised by the League of Communists in the 1980s, just a few years before, for not being politically active.

Of course, the Serbian-Croatian conflict played a huge role there, because in 1989 there was a huge crisis in Kosovo, and this was picked up by people in Slovenia and Croatia who began to see the Albanians as allies against the centralising forces of Milošević's Serb-centred model of Yugoslavia. This led to the cooptation of Albanian parties in Croatia by Franjo Tuđman's HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union), which won Albanian support for independent Croatia. Croatia and Slovenia also,

supported Kosovo. When war broke out in Croatia in 1991, some Albanian civilians joined the armed forces and fought on the Croatian side.

What also happened though, was that Albanians from Kosovo and Macedonia in Croatia became citizens of foreign countries rather than the common state of Yugoslavia. Now that Croatia was at war with Serbia, Kosovar Albanians had the citizenship of an enemy country with which all communication had been cut. You couldn't even make a phone call from Croatia to Kosovo, which was part of Serbia.

This caused all sorts of problems, from running a business to questions about people's status. People felt very insecure, especially those who depended on a low rent for their business premises from the local municipality, and who couldn't rectify their status by obtaining a 'domovnica', the basic document required for Croatian citizenship.

So many Albanians found themselves in great difficulty. Some joined the army, others made donations or provided bread for the army and for refugees.

There were also thousands of Albanians serving in the JNA (Yugoslav People's Army) who were stationed in Croatia when the war broke out. This created another difficulty, because the JNA was taking up arms against Croatia. There are a lot of stories about how Albanians were helped to leave the JNA in Croatia in the summer and autumn of 1991 by going to the Slovenian, Austrian and Italian borders.

This is something that is still quite uncertain and murky, but there were thousands of Albanians, conscripts, and civilians, who went through Croatia and Slovenia to leave the disintegrating Yugoslavia.

Mladen: At the end of the 1980s, even the official party branch in Slovenia supported the striking miners' rally in Trepča. There was a public alliance between Slovenians and Albanians against Serbian hegemony, which disappeared with the independence of Slovenia.

My interviewees told me that they were useful in the process of gaining independence for Slovenia. They told me that they had heard proclamations on the radio such as "Albanian brothers, leave the barracks, don't collaborate with the occupying Yugoslav army, join the Slovenian ranks".

Promises were made by the Slovenian authorities, but some Albanians ended up among the "Izbrisani" (the erased, some 25,000 people who were erased from official Slovenian registries and remained without any legal status). There are many mixed feelings within the Albanian community today.

András Juhász

Rory Archer

Mladen Zobec

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and or French.

P.S.

LeftEast

<https://lefteast.org/intra-yugoslav-migration-of-albanian-workers-and-shopkeepers-from-1953-to-1989/>

Masina

<https://www.masina.rs/eng/intra-yugoslav-migration-of-albanian-workers-and-shopkeepers-from-1953-to-1989-an-interview-with-rory-archer-and-mladen-zobec/>