

# **Yugoslavia's Sunny Side**

**A History of Tourism in Socialism (1950s–1980s)**

Edited by

*Hannes Grandits and Karin Taylor*



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# Highways of Desire

## Cross-Border Shopping in Former Yugoslavia, 1960s–1980s

*Maja Mikula*

Ponte Rosso, Via Carducci and Piazza Unità became our new main centers, our highways of desire, our coveted havens!

[...]

Busloads of lucky people clutching fervently onto their precious plastic bags, and their travel bags overflowing with colorful trophies. The socialist workers from Banat and Macedonia, from Bosnia, but also from Dalmatia and Zagreb, along the highway of their brotherhood and unity, all the way to Italy and back.<sup>1</sup>

Although the violent breakup of socialist Yugoslavia continues to cast a shadow on people's memories of the former country, some "sunnier" aspects of daily life during socialism seem to resist historical amnesia. One of these is the ritual of shopping abroad, which emerges as an oddly recurrent theme across the gamut of former Yugoslav popular cultural texts, media, and genres. Almost invariably, cross-border shopping is evoked with fondness and nostalgia, and associated with what some remember as the Yugoslav era of peace and plenty.

As an exceptionally widespread cultural practice, cross-border shopping involved Yugoslavs of varying ethnic, socioeconomic, cultural, and educational backgrounds. Among the reasonably well-to-do in former Yugoslavia, those who refused to engage in cross-border shopping were very rare. Reflecting the stereotypical representations of gender and generational divide, they were most frequently either males who claimed not to be interested in shopping *per se*, or older people, presumably unaffected by the consumer frenzy.

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<sup>1</sup> Šerbedžija (2004, p. 32). The translation is mine.

In this paper, I examine cross-border shopping in former Yugoslavia in the period between the mid-1960s and early 1980s, and its significance in people's memories of the now defunct socialist state. The aim of my account is to discover how former Yugoslavs make sense of that aspect of their socialist past, and how they relate their individual experiences to the broader social context.

## **Methodology and Concepts**

Several recent studies testify to the pertinence of cross-border shopping in the cultural makeup of former Yugoslavia. At least three of these<sup>2</sup> deal with the scope, significance, and cultural impact of this practice on the social change, identities, and everyday life in the Republic of Slovenia. This is not surprising, considering Slovenia's geographic position, adjacent to two of the three "Western" capitalist countries sharing borders with the former Yugoslavia.<sup>3</sup> The broader focus of my research has led, inevitably, to somewhat different conclusions than those emerging from the previous scholarship on the topic. As will become clear from the discussion that follows, these conclusions pertain not only to the nature of the phenomenon, but also to its relationship to state branding and the ethno-national awareness of the peoples of former Yugoslavia.

While drawing on the insights from recent scholarship, my research is pitched at the pan-Yugoslav level and based on qualitative data gathered from respondents living in various former Yugoslav republics. The literary/textual component of my research is based on a review of relevant cultural texts, including novels, memoirs, television series, and pop songs. The ethnographic component is founded on data collected in 2006 and 2007 through 22 in-depth oral-history interviews, some of which had a mini-focus group format; email correspondence with 12 respondents; and a comprehensive online questionnaire designed to yield mostly qualitative data,<sup>4</sup> which was completed by 27 respondents.

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<sup>2</sup> Luthar (2006); Repe (1998); and Švab (2002).

<sup>3</sup> Italy and Austria; the third country was Greece.

<sup>4</sup> Most questions were open-ended or designed to elicit paragraph-length narrative responses.

All my respondents can be described as belonging to the “new class” of the former Yugoslavia,<sup>5</sup> either as university-educated professionals or specialized trades people.<sup>6</sup> It needs to be emphasized here that, in contrast to Milovan Đilas, who introduced the term “new class” in the 1950s,<sup>7</sup> Patrick Patterson uses it to refer to a broader segment of the Yugoslav population, which emerged during the country’s economic boom of the 1960s. Members of this new class, Patterson explains, “busied themselves shopping for, buying, and enjoying all the tangible things and intangible experiences that their newfound positions of economic privilege afforded them”.<sup>8</sup> The new class, he argues,

was by no means a small, restricted group of the powerful, well-connected, and influential. Quite to the contrary, all this fervid and altogether conspicuous consumption was now, in fact, the domain of more or less ordinary Yugoslav citizens. To be sure, serious differences in earnings and disposable income remained, and the Yugoslav Dream remained unattainable for many people. But the new life of plentiful pleasures and comparative material comfort was within reach for enough of the population to sustain it as a realistic hope even for those who could not at the moment share in the dream fully. The new vision of consumer abundance was grounded firmly enough in Yugoslav social and economic realities to give it substantial legitimacy as a dominant cultural model for the country as a whole—and this was something quite rare in a society in which ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural, and economic differences hampered the development of any notion of a pan-Yugoslav culture.<sup>9</sup>

Scholars disagree as to whether cross-border shopping, as it was practised *en masse* in socialist Yugoslavia, can be categorized as “shopping tourism” or not. While Švab deploys the term without questioning its usage, Luthar argues that the connotations of the word “tourism” do

<sup>5</sup> Patterson (2001).

<sup>6</sup> In the period under investigation, most of my respondents were in their formative years, and all lived in major urban centers across the republics of former Yugoslavia. The slight majority, fifty-five percent, is female.

<sup>7</sup> Đilas (1983 [1957]).

<sup>8</sup> Patterson (2001, p. 3).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.



not apply to the shopping expeditions to Trieste, as these were practiced by Yugoslav shoppers. According to Luthar, these trips were always “experienced as calculated work, which involved discipline and control to stroll past goods on display, not hedonistic strolling, browsing and shopping.”<sup>10</sup> Trieste was thus never perceived as a “Mediterranean city worthy of a tourist’s gaze, but rather as a site of spectacular images of material artifacts in shop windows and well-dressed people in the streets.”<sup>11</sup> Luthar acknowledges that shopping in Trieste also included a ludic or sensual aspect, but describes this facet of the practice as always “integrated into the purchase-driven activity and within the instrumentalism of work.”<sup>12</sup>

While this is a very apt description of shopping in Trieste as it was practiced by a significant segment of the Yugoslav population,<sup>13</sup> there are other remembered scenarios, many of which foreground precisely the ludic, sensual, and above all social and identitarian nature of the practice. I therefore use the term “cross-border shopping,” which has been defined simply as the “movement of people across an international border with the expressed intention of buying goods and then returning home.”<sup>14</sup> This term implies the intentionality of the shopping act, without circumscribing the scope of other activities that may (or may not) take place during the trip. More generic than shopping tourism, the term is taken here to apply to a range of interrelated cultural phenomena, which permeated all segments of Yugoslav society in the time of the country’s peak economic prosperity.

### **Cross-Border Shopping: A Many-Faceted Cultural Practice**

The nature and formal properties of cross-border shopping in the former Yugoslavia changed over time, reflecting to a considerable extent the evolving political and economic processes at work in the country in the period after the Second World War. In the 1950s and early ‘60s,

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<sup>10</sup> Luthar (2006, pp. 247–8).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>13</sup> All of Luthar’s (2006) respondents were from the western part of Slovenia.

<sup>14</sup> Donnan and Wilson (1999, pp. 118–9).

trips abroad were still fairly restricted, and thus mainly limited to family visits and organized excursions. One of my respondents, a man from Zagreb, remembers his first trip abroad to visit his aunt in the northern Bavarian city of Bayreuth:

I visited my auntie in 1958, during the summer school vacation... I remember that, when filling the application form to obtain a passport, I had to declare what I was doing during the war. In my case, the answer did not cause suspicion, because I was still a child. I got my passport, and at the age of sixteen, I departed from Zagreb Central Railway Station, on my own, to "see the wide world." That was my first "shopping" trip.<sup>15</sup>

Following the economic reforms of the 1960s, the Yugoslav economy had incorporated elements of the free-market system that allowed the development of a lifestyle superior to that of any other country in the Eastern Bloc. Under the Yugoslav system, private initiative was permitted for small businesses and agricultural estates, while the majority of the country's factories and enterprises were "socially owned" and run on the basis of worker self-management. In the mid-1960s, Yugoslavia opened up towards the West, and passports, with hardly any administrative restrictions, became available to the majority of the citizens. Visas for the neighboring countries were also abolished. From 1962 onwards, Yugoslav citizens were allowed to purchase foreign currency legally and to keep designated foreign-currency bank accounts. Hard currency was relatively easy to obtain from the Yugoslav guest workers. Furthermore, in the most popular shopping destinations across the border, such as Trieste, shopkeepers typically accepted the Yugoslav currency, dinar, at an exchange rate that was more favorable than the official one. As living standards improved, Yugoslav citizens began to travel abroad in large numbers, for both recreation and shopping. The desire for foreign goods, especially those associated with a "Western" lifestyle, was encouraged and sustained through the continuing cultural influence of the Yugoslav guest workers living in the affluent Western European countries.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> All translations of interview materials are mine.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Patterson (2001) and Szerbhorváth (2002).



Figure 1. *Istanbul, 1975*

Targeted shopping trips across the borders of the former Yugoslavia did not begin in earnest until the early 1970s. Italy, Austria, and Greece soon became the most popular destinations for the shoppers from former Yugoslavia, closely followed by Turkey and Hungary.

It needs to be noted, however, that only Italy was regularly visited by shoppers from all the former Yugoslav republics. Shopping trips to Thessaloniki in Greece were common from Macedonia. Those responsible for the household affairs went there to replenish their larders with Greek olives, olive oil, and *metaxa*.<sup>17</sup> Although clothes and leather goods were also often bought there, they were not considered as “trendy” among the younger generation. Greece was also a common destination for summer vacations, as it was far less expensive than other European countries. The popularity of other countries was to a considerable extent determined by their relative vicinity to the shopper’s place of residence and/or cultural interests: Austria was more popular among the

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<sup>17</sup> A popular Greek distilled spirit.

Croats and the Slovenes; and Turkey among the Macedonians and the Bosnians. In Italy, Trieste was the main destination for the Yugoslav shoppers, followed closely by Udine and other centers close to the land border between Yugoslavia and Italy. Ancona, Pescara, and Bari were also frequently visited, as these Italian cities could be easily reached by sea, thanks to regular ferry services from Zadar, Split, Dubrovnik, and Bar. Shopping trips to Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland usually targeted specific kinds of goods, such as Hungarian food and kitchen utensils, Czech crystal, and Polish silver jewelry and graphic arts. Those Yugoslavs who had opportunities, through their occupational or family ties, to travel further a field, could do their shopping—commensurate with their financial standing—in countries such as England, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, or the USA.

If, while shopping in Italy, some Yugoslavs had “feelings of shame and embarrassment” because they were poorly dressed compared with the Italians,<sup>18</sup> in countries such as Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland they could nurture feelings of superiority because their con-



**Figure 2.** *London, 1978*

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<sup>18</sup> Luthar (2006, p. 252).

suming power was clearly higher than that of the locals. One of my respondents, from Slovenia, remembers that some of her family members often went on bus trips to Czechoslovakia in the 1970s. They did that, she believes, “because it was cheap there... and because they could show to the Czechs that they had more. They would actually bring things from Yugoslavia to sell in Czechoslovakia. I couldn’t believe what wonderful things they bought in Czechoslovakia, for nothing... fur, jewelry, and the like.” A respondent from Sarajevo reports that, from the Eastern parts of Yugoslavia, people bartered their wares in Hungary and Romania, in exchange for beautiful hand-made lace, bed linen, and tablecloths, which were used by Yugoslav fashion designers to make highly sought-after pieces of clothing.

Depending on their economic means, interests, and needs, Yugoslavs crossed borders to shop in department stores, at markets and street stalls, in small shops, exclusive boutiques, and, in the 1980s, in factory stores and outlet centers.<sup>19</sup> Most commonly, they were buying clothing, underwear, nylon, and later polyester and lycra stockings, leather and calico shoes, and handbags. Perfumes, toiletries, and taxable goods such as alcoholic drinks and cigarettes also figured significantly on the Yugoslav cross-border shopping lists during that period. Household items, sanitary products, and food supplies became more prominent during the periods of frequent and severe shortages of these goods in the 1980s. Then came everything else: toys and baby prod-

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<sup>19</sup> The “shopping streets” remembered by my respondents as particularly popular among former Yugoslav shoppers were Via Carducci and Corso Italia in Trieste, Corso Cavour in Bari, Via Veneto in Rome, and Tsimiski Street in Thessaloniki. Trieste’s Borgo Teresiano district, an area near the city’s railway station, used to brim with cheap shops catering for Yugoslav clientele. A recent report estimates that, in this area—popularly called by the locals the “district of the *jeansinari*” (jeans sellers)—between 60,000 and 65,000 pairs of jeans were sold every week during the heyday of the 1970s. See Klevisser (2006, p. 80). Within Borgo Teresiano, the marketplace of Ponte Rosso had the reputation of being the quintessential locale of Yugoslav shopping in Trieste. Another shop that has a significant place in many people’s memories is the outlet of the now defunct Swiss jeweler and watchmaker Darwil in Trieste’s Piazza S. Antonio Nuovo, which operated very successfully in the 1960s and early ‘70s, due in no small part to Yugoslav shoppers.



Figure 3. Venice, 1981

ucts; cosmetics; jewelry; sports and fishing equipment; tools; kitchen utensils; car and boat accessories; technical equipment; cameras and photographic accessories; music records and cassettes; arts and crafts supplies; comics, magazines, books, and artworks.

Among the fashion-conscious younger generation of the 1970s and '80s, the "must-have" brands included Lacoste, Benetton, and Robbe di Kappa for T-shirts, jumpers, and cardigans; Levi's, Lee, Wrangler, Rifle, Carrera, and Swinger for jeans; Bally, Madras, and Bata for shoes; Converse, Fila, and Adidas for sports apparel and shoes. For young people, Trieste became the fashion Mecca and the true apotheosis of "Western" affluence. The young eagerly accepted every new fad that became available in Trieste's shops and street stalls. Many of these fads lingered in people's memories for many years after the fashion had faded.

Some of these were the long polyester raincoat (*šuškvac*), the high-waist bell-bottom jeans (*svingerice*), the hard-tipped shoes (*brukserice*), the ankle-high suede shoes (*sajmonice*, *spenserice*, or *stoperice*), the US-military style jackets (the longer variety was known as *vijetnamka* or *komandosica* and the shorter as *tankerica*), the Mont-

gomery-style duffle coats (*đubretarac*), and the yellow and navy blue reversible rain jackets (*kabanica s dva lica*), to name only the few items that most clearly acted as social markers.<sup>20</sup>

The heyday of former Yugoslav cross-border shopping lasted nearly two decades. Its decline began with the economic crisis of the early 1980s, when the heavily indebted Yugoslav government decided to restrict the country's outflow of private money by introducing heavy deposits for cross-border travel. The ensuing downturn in cross-border shopping was later exacerbated by the war that led to Yugoslavia's disintegration in the 1990s. Eventually, cross-border shopping was made all but obsolete as the newly independent states opened up their markets and progressively plugged into the global flows of capital and commodities.

The two principal reasons for cross-border shopping given by my respondents were the wider choice of products and the considerable appeal of anything that came from the "West." These two reasons were closely followed by those of the shortages of certain products in former Yugoslavia, and the higher quality of products across the border. Shopping items were mostly intended for personal consumption, as gifts for family and friends, or as bribes for doctors, nurses, and various officials in the positions of power, in exchange for their services. They were also used in private enterprises, such as cafés, restaurants, or hairdressing salons. Some items were simply not available from the Yugoslav shops, or were expensive when bought from a dealer. In particular, clothes made in Yugoslavia were often considered "uncool" (*bez veze*). One respondent, from Bosnia, describes the Italian clothes she used to wear, which "were colorful, had interesting designs, were made of beautiful materials, and thus differed from the black-brown-navy color trio, which had the reputation in Yugoslavia of being more durable, less susceptible to soiling, and perfect for everyday wear and tear." Similarly, a woman from Macedonia remembers that Western products had a special appeal among her peers in Skopje: "That whole generation grew up thinking that the West was something special, an ideal to aspire to. Many of my friends actually ended up living in a 'Western' country. That did not mean that we did not love our own country, but the West was our ideal."

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<sup>20</sup> Douglas and Isherwood (1996 [1979], pp. 44–5).

The most common pattern for the cross-border shopping trips was twice a year,<sup>21</sup> but those residing closer to the border, and those whose jobs involved travelling shopped in other countries once a month or even more often. Day trips typically took place on Saturdays, and longer shopping trips, which included recreational activities other than shopping, were often reserved for major public holidays, such as International Workers' Day on 1 May and the national Republic Day on 29 November. Half of my respondents remember their shopping trips as quite tiring, but nevertheless interesting and exciting. Almost without exception, they remember these trips as social events, undertaken in the company of family or friends. Yugoslavs travelled by buses, by car, or by train, and even by plane to more distant destinations. Tour operators such as Putnik, Lasta, Turistička zajednica Sarajevo, or Generalturist had regular bus trips to Trieste, with those on Saturdays being the most popular. Another common practice was to "spice up" work-related travel with cross-border shopping expeditions. During the 1970s, cross-republic gatherings, trade fairs, and academic symposia often took place in the vicinity of Yugoslavia's borders with Italy or Austria, and were seen as occasions for quick shopping jaunts to the "other side." A man from Split recalls crossing the Austrian border twice a day during IBM seminars that were taking place in Radovljica in Slovenia, for no other reason but to "indulge the travel bug." Another respondent, a male from Macedonia, remembers his "great escape" to Trieste, along with three other students and one lecturer, from the annual student gathering, Elektrijada, when this event was taking place in Istria or the Gulf of Quarnero:

As participants, we were not allowed to cross the border. That time, four of us, three students and one lecturer, hired a rental car and left very early, to go shopping in Trieste. We had to be back by dinner, because that was when they used to take roll call. But, we were ten minutes late, and everyone knew we were up to no good. All our friends covered up for us, saying: "Oh, I just saw him a moment ago... he must be somewhere around..."

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<sup>21</sup> As a respondent from Croatia put it, "usually once before winter and then once again before summer," to replenish the wardrobe.



For those former Yugoslavs who resided in the areas adjacent to the border, cross-border shopping was facilitated by the existence of border-pass cards (called *propusnica* or *iskaznica*), which entitled the bearer to customs privileges unavailable to ordinary border crossers.<sup>22</sup> In these areas, called *pogranična zona* or *malogranična zona*, goods often travelled across the border in both directions. Slovene meat, for example, was in high demand on the Italian side of the border. A woman originally from that area recounts:

My family had many friends in the old Gorizia. We lived in Solkan.<sup>23</sup> My family comes from those parts which used to be Italy before the war. My aunties knew many people there. And this was very interesting; meat was cheaper and better in Slovenia than it was in Italy. My aunties used to smuggle meat across the border, and sell it there for hard currency. I remember, as residents of the border area, we used to have border-pass cards, which entitled us to carry across a certain quantity of meat every month. My aunties would go on their bikes... That was how we got our *lire*, which we then used to buy things in Italy.

As Donnan and Wilson have noted, there is almost always "some form of economic differential at play between two nation-states, and some product, service, price or quality that is in more demand on one side of the border than on the other."<sup>24</sup> Meat was not the only Yugoslav product that attracted shoppers from the other side of the border: fresh fish (especially the wild sea perch or *brancin*), the endangered date shell (*prstac*) and the Istrian truffle (*tartuf*) were some of the delicacies that were highly prized by Italian food lovers.

Because cross-border shopping was such a pervasive phenomenon in former Yugoslavia, any attempt to construct a plausible profile of the average shopper would be a futile endeavor. The cultural practice

<sup>22</sup> For details, see Karadžić (1978).

<sup>23</sup> Solkan and Sv. Petar (Solcano and San Pietro in Italian), the two easternmost suburbs of the Italian town of Gorizia with a majority Slovene population, were handed over to Tito's Yugoslavia in 1947 by the Paris Peace Treaty. These two communities formed the nucleus around which the new city of Nova Gorica was later built.

<sup>24</sup> Donnan and Wilson (1999, p. 119).

of shopping abroad traversed a wide range of identifications, including ethnicity, gender, age, social standing, and cultural and educational background. As elsewhere in socialist societies, class differentiation in the former Yugoslavia of the 1960s and '70s was not clear-cut. While, on the one hand, there was a sizeable segment of the population participating in the "good life" that the country had to offer,<sup>25</sup> cleavages based on income, occupation, education, and lifestyle were becoming more prominent.

In the stories told by my respondents, this differentiation becomes evident from the kinds of goods bought abroad, types of shops patronized, and patterns of cross-border shopping expeditions. At the upper end of the spectrum, lifestyle choices, hobbies, and leisure pursuits determined the types of commodities that were sought across the border. For example, a male respondent from Zagreb recalled,

if you wanted to buy high-quality fishing equipment, or at least see the best selection of it, you had to go to France. The best cameras and the best choice of photographic equipment were in Germany. If you wanted to buy the cheapest gold, or objects made of gold, you had to go to Lebanon.

At the lower end of the spectrum, black-market trade was adopted as a survival strategy, or at least as a means of improving a person's living standards. Several respondents reported that some of their friends or acquaintances adopted that practice to support themselves while studying, or to complement their meager income. In Trieste, the more affluent shoppers asserted their "distinction"<sup>26</sup> by shopping in the more expensive establishments of Via Mazzini, Corso Italia, or Via Carducci, thus disassociating themselves from the "smugglers" and "cheap shoppers" who patronized the run-of-the-mill jeans shops of the Borgo Teresiano district. A prominent group engaged in petty trading was Roma women. A female respondent from Sarajevo recalls:

The Roma women from Sarajevo used to go to Trieste to buy jeans, underwear, and similar things... They would arrange them in little piles in the street, or on a market stall. At the time, it was impossible

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<sup>25</sup> Patterson (2001, p. 4).

<sup>26</sup> Bourdieu (1977 [1972]).

to find larger sizes of underwear in Yugoslavia. Their customers were mostly retired women and housewives. As young girls, we did not even look at those things, we thought they were funny. And the Roma women would say, these things are from Italy, from Trieste, they have only just arrived... Then they were not there for five or six days, and then they came again.

The age group most fully involved in the practice of cross-border shopping were those who were in their formative years, that is, in their teens or early twenties, in the 1960s and '70s. As regards the gender distinctions in my respondents' memories of their shopping experiences, they reflect the stereotypical rhetoric reported by previous researchers.<sup>27</sup> As Campbell has argued, the male shopping rhetoric is typically focused on need, while the female rhetoric seems to be centered upon want and desire.<sup>28</sup> In a similar vein, a female respondent from Zagreb remembers her childhood expeditions to Trieste, always with her mother and a group of her mother's female friends. Her father refused to go, as "he did not care what he was wearing. There was no way that he would ever go from one shop to another, trying on clothes." According to this respondent, her father loathed those trips that had the sole purpose of shopping, and considered them "petit-bourgeois activities."

Most of my respondents remember their cross-border shopping expeditions as important social occasions, always undertaken with friends or family. For example, a male respondent from Zagreb noted that, "in the company of others, it was easier to face the challenges of the trip, such as the customs, or not knowing the language, or having to find our way in an unfamiliar city." As Lehtonen and Mäenpää have argued, shopping always "provides a means for the creation and maintenance of social relations, and in this way it affects the process of social identification."<sup>29</sup> Several of my respondents remember long-distance travel by public transport as an occasion to socialize with fellow travelers. The atmosphere on the tour buses, a woman from Sarajevo recalls, was "typical for the Yugoslavs in those times. People would start eating and drinking almost immediately, ten kilometers away from the departure point. They would share their food and offer

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<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Campbell (1987; 1997).

<sup>28</sup> Campbell (1997, p. 175).

<sup>29</sup> Lehtonen and Mäenpää (1997, p. 151).

it to other passengers, and of course, to the driver and the conductor, too." Longer train trips, like those from Skopje to Trieste, are remembered with particular fondness as an occasion for making new friends along the way:

Those trips were a fantastic experience! I always travelled by night from Skopje to Trieste, with at least five or six of my friends, and we always had great fun and many adventures during the trip. New passengers would always board the train in Niš.<sup>30</sup> They were those who worked in Slovenia, and they would always have bacon, onion, all sorts of home-made sausages, so they would feed us for the rest of the trip.

A peculiar form of bonding was achieved through complicity in "hiding" the goods bought on the other side of the border, to avoid paying customs duty. Many respondents remember wearing old clothes for the trip, disposing of them at the shopping destination, and putting on the clothes that had just been bought there. Smaller items were hidden inside sandwiches, tucked inside underwear, under shoe soles, or in the double bottom of a handbag. Also, things were hidden in car boots or under the lining on car doors; clothes were tucked in between bus seats or quickly passed to the compartments of a train that had already been visited by the customs officers. Alternatively, a bag that "belonged to no one" was left somewhere on the train, and if the customs officers happened to find it, they would simply take it without further questions. Sometimes, they were distributed among those passengers who carried fewer goods than was officially allowed. Bus drivers were often accomplices in these maneuvers, and so were customs officers. A woman from Sarajevo remembers that

trips to Turkey regularly ended with creative packing, so that the luggage appeared of the acceptable size. I have never gone there, but smuggling from Turkey was then so widespread that one could always easily find five people who had "just returned" from there, with their lively stories about how they bribed the Bulgarian customs officers, etc. Our customs officers would also let things pass with a small bribe (chocolate, cigarettes, alcohol), while Slovene officers were known for their intransigence.

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<sup>30</sup> A city in south-eastern Serbia.

In her study of shopping expeditions to Trieste from socialist Slovenia, Breda Luthar notes the “arbitrariness of customs officials regarding law enforcement,” and adds that this arbitrariness contributed to the “feeling of uncertainty and risk taking, and to the internalization of restraint” among her interviewees.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, my respondents have mixed memories of their encounters with the Yugoslav customs officers. A woman from Slovenia recalls that they were “never Slovenes. They were always Southerners. I remember, first of all, they showed no respect for us.” A woman from Bosnia, on the other hand, reports instances of camaraderie with customs officers in the overall underground economy of bribery and personal favoritism:

Someone would find out that an officer at a particular crossing is, say, a guy from Travnik... That was in the 1970s, when cafés began to appear everywhere. Whoever was able to do it went to Italy, to buy Gaggia coffee machines, frappé blenders. They knew “their” person would be at the customs, so they would fill truck-loads of those machines, beautiful glasses. Cafés in Sarajevo were as well equipped as those in Izola or Koper, closer to the Italian border. Literally, whole truckloads would just pass, and you would give something to the customs people, as a treat. It was all based on acquaintance, rather than on money changing hands. In those times acquaintance meant a lot.

The above example points to the porous boundaries between the public and the private spheres in former Yugoslav society. As Karin Taylor has argued, referring to Bulgaria, the social realm in socialist societies “cut across many lines that separate ‘public’ from ‘private’ in Western societies” as interaction was partly organized “along instrumental lines of bargaining, reciprocal favours, and the widespread practice of circumventing regulations.”<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, outwitting those who represent institutional power did not necessarily involve negative connotations in the former Yugoslav imaginary, as it in fact underpinned the country’s very narrative of origin in partisan struggle, and the stories of Tito as a trickster, capable of maintaining the country’s independence from both the East and the West.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Luthar (2006, p. 243).

<sup>32</sup> Taylor (2006, p. 18).

<sup>33</sup> Stories of Tito’s childhood, his illegal activism before the war, his antifas-

The “good life” was an important part of the former Yugoslavia’s branding, and shopping across borders was one of the ways to achieve it. It therefore comes as no surprise that the permissive attitude of the authorities concerning smugglers and private imports has been interpreted as “part of the highly effective political self-legitimation of the system”.<sup>34</sup> According to Patrick Patterson, people experienced this good life as Yugoslav citizens, that is, as beneficiaries of “specifically Yugoslav kind of state socialism—and not, say, as ethnic Slovenes, Croats, Magyars, etc., or as citizens of a given republic or residents of a given region.”<sup>35</sup> Tito himself, with his well-known penchant for expensive clothes, fine cigars, and extravagant pastimes, is remembered by one of my Slovene respondents as a “symbol of luxury, along with everything else. We had him as an ideal; that was who we were.”<sup>36</sup>

### Cross-Border Shopping, Popular Culture, and Yugo-Nostalgia

There is no doubt that, in the literary and popular-cultural corpus that can be described as “Yugo-nostalgic,”<sup>37</sup> cross-border shopping figures as a recognizable cultural topos. As early as 1969—and thus right in the midst of the period when cross-border shopping was reaching its peak—the ritual was immortalized in the concluding episode of the popular television series *Naše malo misto* (“Our Little Town”). Based on a screenplay by a writer and journalist from Split, Miljenko Smoje, and directed by Danijel Marušić, this thirteen-episode series still has a cult status across the former Yugoslav republics.<sup>38</sup> A chronicle of a fictional small town on the Adriatic coast in the period beginning shortly

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cist resistance during the Second World War and his conflict with Stalin all fall into this category.

<sup>34</sup> Wessely (2002, p. 7).

<sup>35</sup> Patterson (2001, p. 43).

<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, the slogan “We are all Tito!” (“*Svi smo mi Tito!*”), widely promoted by the former Yugoslav ideological state apparatus, in fact implies that all Yugoslavs should emulate their President as a role model.

<sup>37</sup> This corpus encompasses both those texts that were in some way expressing or reflecting the nation-building rhetoric of socialist Yugoslavia, and those written since the 1990s, which pay nostalgic tribute to the former state.

<sup>38</sup> For Slovenia, see Velikonja (2002).

before the Second World War, and extending into the era of economic expansion and liberalization in the 1960s, the series portrays a gallery of memorable characters in their daily struggle for survival in a time of radical social and political change. In the last episode, the four main characters—Dotur Luidi, a Dante-loving medical doctor and Padua graduate (actor Karlo Bulić); his admiring and supportive *de facto* wife Bepina (Asja Kisić); the resourceful director of the town's only hotel, Roko Prč (Boris Dvornik); and Roko's parvenue wife Anđa Vlajina (Zdravka Krstulović)—embark on a trip to Trieste, to buy a bridal gown for Bepina's long awaited formal wedding to Luigi. On the way back, at the border, Bepina's naïve honesty spoils their attempts to avoid paying customs duty for a car radio they had bought in Trieste.

It is no coincidence that shopping in Trieste appears in the grand finale of this legendary chronicle of ordinary life in former Yugoslavia. Despite the fact that the characters in the series spoke in the dialect of Split, not intimately familiar to viewers outside the coastal region, *Our Little Town* was widely seen as epitomizing provincial life anywhere in former Yugoslavia. This idea was also conveyed by the opening song of each episode:

Every one of our little towns  
 Has a clean soul  
 Because whatever comes to its mind  
 Just makes time pass on.  
 And if it so happens  
 That someone is hit by misfortune,  
 Well, my God!  
 What can one do?  
 It could always have been worse.<sup>39</sup>

At the time when the series went to air for the first time, in 1969, many former Yugoslavs had just begun to buy their clothes across the Italian border, build weekend houses, and take out loans for their first cars.<sup>40</sup> Both on the television screen and in real life, shopping in Trieste represented a powerful object of desire and a promise of self-fulfillment, which was within the reach of ordinary people. In *Our Little Town*,

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<sup>39</sup> The translation is mine.

<sup>40</sup> Adrić et al. (2004, p. 267).

this is accentuated by the fact that, for Bepina, the shopping episode serves as an overture to her long awaited wedding to Luidi, and her eventual illness and death in the same episode.

Patterson notes that, despite the overwhelming popularity of cross-border shopping in former Yugoslavia, “defection was never a major worry. Yugoslav shoppers left, and they came right back.”<sup>41</sup> It is true that, as a topos in Yugoslavia’s nation-building narrative, the return home with trophies from the “other side” was at least as important as crossing the border. Trieste may have meant a “different kind of freedom, a different kind of feeling” to many Yugoslavs, actor Rade Šerbedžija remembers in his memoirs, but it was also very important to return home after the trip, with a feeling of achievement and victory.<sup>42</sup>

This pattern of departure and return lies at the very heart of Yugoslavia’s nation-building narrative, as it emerges in its official state-sponsored guises, as well as a variety of popular cultural texts. A compelling example can be found in the classic children’s poem, *The Hedgehog’s House* (*Ježeva kućica*), written by Branko Ćopić shortly after the end of the Second World War.<sup>43</sup> This poem has been described as the “most loved Yugoslav book for children of all times.”<sup>44</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, whose literary opus since the breakup of socialist Yugoslavia has been to a large extent devoted to rescuing the former country’s “sunny side” from historical erasure, describes *The Hedgehog’s House* as a “little, warm, innocent book,” which “became the property of generation after generation of children born in Yugoslavia.”<sup>45</sup> In the poem, the hedgehog Ježurka is a tireless hunter, respected by all the forest animals. One day, Ježurka is invited by the vixen to have lunch at her place. In the evening, after a sumptuous feast that has lasted several hours, he refuses the vixen’s invitation to stay overnight and insists on returning home to sleep. Along with three other animals—a

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<sup>41</sup> Patterson (2001, p. 11).

<sup>42</sup> Šerbedžija (2004, p. 32).

<sup>43</sup> Ćopić (2001 [1949]).

<sup>44</sup> Adrić, et al. (2004, p. 176).

<sup>45</sup> Ugrešić (1998 [1995], p. 224). Ugrešić (ibid.) also mentions a “circle of Zagreb students who studied Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida assiduously, but proclaimed the ‘silly’ but ‘dear old *Hedgehog’s House*’ their cult book, and amused themselves by reciting lines learned by heart.”



mean wolf, a clumsy bear, and a dirty boar—the vixen follows the hedgehog to find out why he is so proud of his house. The animals are surprised to find out that Ježurka's house is not a palace, but a humble dwelling. Ježurka's explanation, in verse, was memorized word by word by many generations of Yugoslav school children:

How dear I hold my native home,  
 Whatever it may be like.  
 It is simple and modest, but it is mine.  
 Here I am free and slave to no one.  
 I am diligent, I work, and I hunt,  
 And I live peacefully under my own roof.  
 Only true villains, who go with the Devil,  
 Would swap their home for a meal.<sup>46</sup>

It was only after Yugoslavia had disintegrated that the topos of cross-border shopping assumed a clear symbolic value, as a badge of identity associated with the former country. This is perhaps most evident from several key texts written by journalist and literary author Slavenka Drakulić.<sup>47</sup> Drakulić makes it clear that cross-border shopping was a “key thing,” which distinguished former Yugoslavia from other socialist countries in Eastern and Central Europe:

People in the West always tend to forget *one key thing* about Yugoslavia,<sup>48</sup> that we had something that made us different from the citizens of the Eastern bloc: we had a passport, the possibility to travel. And we had enough surplus money with no opportunity to invest in the economy (which was why everyone who could invested in build-

<sup>46</sup> Čopić (2001 [1949], p. 14). The translation is mine.

<sup>47</sup> Most notably, in her essay collections (1993; 1994). It seems apposite to keep in mind here that both Ugrešić and Drakulić were among the five women who became known as the “witches from Rio” (the other three were Rada Iveković, Vesna Kesić, and Jelena Lovrić), accused in 1992 in the Croatian press of allegedly tarnishing Croatia's reputation overseas by complaining about media control in the country at the Congress of PEN International Association of Literary Writers in Rio de Janeiro earlier that year. For more details about the affair, see Mikula (2005, pp. 93–4).

<sup>48</sup> The italics are mine.

ing weekend houses in the mid-sixties) and no outlet but to exchange it on the black market for hard currency and then go shopping. Yes, shopping to the nearest cities in Austria and Italy. We bought everything—clothes, shoes, cosmetics, sweets, coffee, even fruit and toilet paper... Millions and millions of people crossed the border every year just to savor the West and to buy something, perhaps as a mere gesture.<sup>49</sup>

Elsewhere, Drakulić recalls the incredible allure of a doll bought during her first trip to Italy as a child. This large doll, with moveable blue eyes and dressed in an embroidered silk dress with “real” shoes and underwear, was “not just a doll but an icon, a message from another world, a fragment of one reality that pierced into the other like a shard of broken glass, making us suffer in some strange way, longing for the indefinite ‘other’.”<sup>50</sup> Her reference to “us” and the “other” in this context is, of course, a fairly explicit reference to psychoanalytic theories of identity, in which the doll—an “icon” of Western consumerism—is interpreted as the “constitutive lack” which made “us,” that is, the former Yugoslavs, who we were.

A similar articulation of cross-border shopping and former Yugoslav identity, albeit with a somewhat different class twist, is also posited by Dubravka Ugrešić. In her novel *The Ministry of Pain*,<sup>51</sup> Ugrešić uses two images—the “gypsy bag” and the train to Trieste—to evoke another facet of cross-border shopping in former Yugoslavia: the black-market trading practiced among others, as was mentioned above, by Roma women. For Ugrešić, the “gypsy bag” (the cheap plastic bag with red, white, and blue stripes, which she associates with Roma women) is “like a parody of the Yugoslav flag (Red, white, and blue! We shall e’er be true!) minus the red star.”<sup>52</sup> With more than a tinge of nostalgia, Ugrešić recalls:

Oh, the jeans, the T-shirts, the coffee that traveled in those bags from Trieste to Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria. [...] The plas-

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<sup>49</sup> Drakulić (1994, pp. 135–6).

<sup>50</sup> Drakulić (1991, p. 59).

<sup>51</sup> Ugrešić (2006).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

tic bags with the red, white, and blue stripes were nomads, they were refugees, they were homeless, but they were survivors, too: they rode trains with no ticket and crossed borders with no passport.<sup>53</sup>

She remembers the train to Trieste as loaded with black market goods, and recounts a joke, which was popular at the time of Tito's death in May 1980:

The peak of the Trieste shopping spree coincided with Tito's death. Tito died at the age of eighty-eight, and one of the ways the event was marked was by a flurry of agricultural activity: one community planted "eighty-eight roses for Comrade Tito," another "eighty-eight birches for Comrade Tito" and so on. Hence the gypsy joke: A customs official on the train from Trieste asks a Gypsy, "What have you got in those sacks?" The Gypsy responds without missing a beat, "eighty-eight Levi's for Comrade Tito."<sup>54</sup>

I conclude my review of the cross-border shopping topos in literary and popular-cultural texts with a song by the "Western" (Zagreb/Sarajevo) offshoot of the former Sarajevo pop band Zabranjeno pušenje ("No Smoking").<sup>55</sup> The song "Jugo 45"<sup>56</sup> takes the articulation of former Yugoslav identity and cross-border shopping further, by making it central to a narrative exalting the sentiment of brotherhood and unity, constitutive of the former Yugoslav nation-building rhetoric:

They say the world's wonders  
Are the pyramids in Africa.  
They say the world's wonders

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 69–70.

<sup>55</sup> The original band, which was disbanded during the war in Sarajevo, has two offshoots: the "Western" offshoot has kept the original name of the band, and the "Eastern" offshoot, which operates in Belgrade under the name of No Smoking Orchestra.

<sup>56</sup> The song appeared on the album *Agent tajne sile* ("The Agent of a Secret Power") released in 1999. In addition to being a car model by the Serbian manufacturer Zastava from Kragujevac, in its time second in popularity only to the omnipresent Fićo (Zastava 750), "Jugo 45" refers to socialist Yugoslavia and its official "date of birth" on 29 November 1945.

Are the big rivers in India.  
But no wonder can ever  
Match the sight  
When my father parked  
A Jugo 45 in our back yard.  
[...]  
That was a good time,  
Everything on loan, everything for a friend,  
Just fill the car with petrol  
And drive off to Trieste to buy jeans.  
[...]  
Our neighbor Franjo  
Borrowed it to sell apples,  
Our neighbor Momo  
When his wife was giving birth.  
Uncle Mirzo took it  
Whenever he went whoring.  
Even I sometimes drove it,  
When I got hold of the keys.  
I took a peek one evening  
As I heard voices in the back yard.  
Momo, Franjo, and Uncle Mirzo<sup>57</sup>  
Were talking softly.  
Then they shook hands  
You can't go against your neighbor  
And they drank a round  
And left in silence.  
Our Jugo 45 looked really small that evening.  
Our Jugo 45 looked really small that evening.  
We fled one morning  
With two plastic bags  
First down Lenin Street,  
And then across Ljubljana Road.  
We have a better life today  
In a new town and in a new flat.  
Our Dad has become a "big shot,"  
A canton minister.  
But, in my head, there is always

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The three neighbors represent the three Bosnian ethnic groups: Franjo as the Croats, Momo as the Serbs, and Mirzo as the Muslims.

The same image, the same flash from the past:  
Our old house, and the Jugo 45  
Parked in the back yard.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

Today, citizens of the independent countries that once formed socialist Yugoslavia have no need to cross borders to access foreign goods, as major international retail chains have their outlets in most capital cities, and imported goods are generally readily available. Yet the phenomenon of cross-border shopping continues to represent a fascinating slice of recent history, because it was so deeply implicated in the nation-building narratives of the erstwhile country.

Its extreme popularity can be partly explained in terms of a projected cultural hegemony of the West, or as a "tactic" of adaptation to the living conditions under socialism. In order to understand this cultural practice fully, it is necessary to look at it from the perspective of former Yugoslavian nation building, to which it is intimately related. I have argued that cross-border shopping evoked manifold narratives that went beyond mere pragmatism, or a simple symbolism of status and prestige. These narratives hinged on an array of circumstantial factors, and cut across a variety of discourses and power relationships. Most importantly, they enacted, albeit in an ironic way, the hegemonic narrative of Yugoslavia's "uniqueness" by "translating" it into the lived experience of "pleasures" unavailable in the countries of the Eastern bloc proper. At the same time, however, they were gnawing at the edges of Yugoslavia's foundational narrative by channeling people's desires and notions of what constitutes the "good life" towards capitalism and the "West."

As the decline of cross-border shopping went hand in hand with Yugoslavia's loss of legitimacy in the 1980s, it is possible to hypothesize that the experience of Western consumerism may have contributed to the eventual de-legitimization of the socialist state. Schol-

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<sup>58</sup> Both the translation and the emphasis are mine.

ars have argued that consumer culture played an important role in consolidating the Yugoslav national community in the first place.<sup>59</sup> Could it be, then, that it was equally instrumental in bringing about Yugoslavia's eventual demise? To answer this question, one would need to disentangle the dynamic and ultimately fragile web of social, cultural, and ideological values that sustained the integrity of the country during the best part of its historical existence. While this task goes beyond the scope of this chapter, it is hoped that further research may provide useful insights in that direction.

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<sup>59</sup> See, for example, Patterson, "The New Class", and Szerbhorváth, "Suffering and Legitimacy."

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