

Romani writers and the legacies of Yugoslavia

by Sofiya Zahova

Prior to 1989, Yugoslavia was one of the few countries to have official policies supporting Romani cultural production and Romani activism within the borders of the federation and internationally. From the late 1960s, the term *Roma* was officially used in Yugoslavia, and by the late 1980s several Romani-related activities and initiatives had taken place. However, the situation changed radically in the 1990s with the dissolution of the federation and subsequent ethno-political conflicts among the newly independent states. The Roma lost not only their ethnic group status, but also the rights that had been given to them as such. During the Yugoslav wars many were forced to leave their homes as refugees.

The newly constituted republics initially focused on policies reinforcing their new state identities, often oriented against ethnic “others”. Having in mind these contrasts, it is no wonder that many Yugoslavia-born Roma are nostalgic about the time before the breakup of the federation. For them (similarly to other Yugoslav citizens) the leader Josip Broz Tito, the slogan “Brotherhood and Unity”, and the Yugoslav passport are symbols of a better life, social security, and economic opportunities, including open borders for traveling and working in the West. Far from claiming that socialist Yugoslavia was a paradise on earth for the Roma, the point of this article is to show that the Roma-related identity politics of the Yugoslav federation of the 1970s and 1980s created space for Romani cultural production and networking that has been sustained since 1990 with positive references to “Yugoslav” (*Jugosloven*), “former Yugoslavia” (*bivša Jugoslavija*), and “old-time

Yugoslavia” (*nekadašna Jugoslavija, tadašna Jugoslavija*). Romani activists have been stressing the economic, political, and symbolic losses for the Roma after the breakup of the federation. These activists, often including writers, publishers, and editors, have been trying to maintain networks within the borders of the former federation and to continue the activities that were initiated in the former Yugoslavia. In their literary activities, a common belonging and Yugoslav Romani identity have been demonstrated through various means.

AFTER PRESENTING YUGOSLAVIA'S Romani policies in the first parts of the article, in the second part I discuss activities aimed at maintaining Yugoslavian cultural practices in the absence of Yugoslavia as a political entity. My aim is to reveal practices and narratives related to Yugoslav topics, examining the way in which they sustain and demonstrate Romani (post-)Yugoslav belonging. My main argument is that a sense of Yugoslav belonging and cooperation was maintained among the Romani writers and activists, with explicitly positive references to Yugoslav legacies, while the official post-Yugoslav political discourse among the rest of the ethnic and national communities' leaderships was to a great extent built on criticizing Yugoslav policies and ideologies. Such activities are not the only developments going on in the Romani publishing landscape in the former Yugoslavian territories. There are naturally many individual state-based Romani publishing activities taking place, but these will not be explicitly discussed except when they are related to the legacies of the Yugoslavian Romani policies.

abstract

This article discusses Yugoslavia's ethnic and Romani policies and the activities for maintaining common cultural practices among Romani writers and activists after the dissolution of the federation as a political entity, and it examines literary activities and narratives related to Yugoslav topics and the way in which they sustain and demonstrate Romani (post-)Yugoslav belonging. The article argues that a sense of Yugoslav belonging and cooperation has been maintained among Romani writers and activists with explicitly positive references to the legacies of Yugoslavia. These tendencies contrast with the official post-Yugoslav political discourse among the rest of the ethnic and national communities' leaderships, which have been to a great extent built on criticizing Yugoslav policies and ideologies.

KEY WORDS: Yugoslavia, ethnic policies, Roma, Romani literature, Romani movement.



Ethnic policies and Romani activism during and after Yugoslavia

The first original published works by Romani authors appeared during the time of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). It must be mentioned, however, that the publishing of Romani folklore collections, as well as Romani civil movement and journalism publications, date back to the interwar period of the so-called first Yugoslavia (Kingdom of Yugoslavia, 1929–1939). In 1935 three issues of the newspaper *Romano Lil* were published in Belgrade,¹ and this later became an inspiration and an example for Romani activism. The newspaper's editor, the Rom Svetozar Simić, wrote a novel named *Gypsy Blood* that remained unpublished.² Rade Uhlik, a researcher of Romani language and culture, started publishing his collections of Romani folklore in the 1930s and continued publishing folklore materials during and after the Second World War.³

The Yugoslav federation after 1946 underwent political periods in which its ethnic policies varied. These policies were related to the constitutional arrangements in the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia (*Federativna Narodna Republika Jugoslavija* – FNRJ, 1946–1963) and later the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia – SFRY (*Socialistička Federativna Republika Jugoslavija* – SFRJ, 1963–1992). SFRY ethnic policies were organized around a hierarchical structure of the communities in the federation and were categorized into three main types – nations, nationalities, and ethnic groups. The word *narod* (nation) was used for the six Yugoslav republics, *narodnost* (nationality) specified communities having their own motherland outside of Yugoslavia, and *etnička grupa* (ethnic group) signified stateless communities (such as the Roma).⁴ In general, the rights of each community depended on their place in this ethnic hierarchy. The national communities, also called the “constituent nations [of Yugoslavia]” enjoyed the greatest rights, while the communities considered as “underdeveloped” and too “immature” to be nations had the least rights (political, linguistic, etc.). At the 1991 census all communities – including Roma – were “equalized” and they all were categorized as nationalities (*nacionalnosti*). This became a reason for activists and researchers to consider the 1991 Yugoslav census as a big achievement regarding elevating the status of the Roma from ethnic group into a nation.⁵

DESPITE THE LOW position of the Roma as an ethnic group in the SFRY (in terms of political and cultural rights), after 1964 we can speak about conditions in which Romani literary and cultural production were stimulated. Whereas in most of the Eastern

Bloc countries the display of Gypsy/Romani identity and the establishment of Romani organizations were not possible,⁶ in Yugoslavia Romani activism was on the rise.⁷ Slobodan Berber-

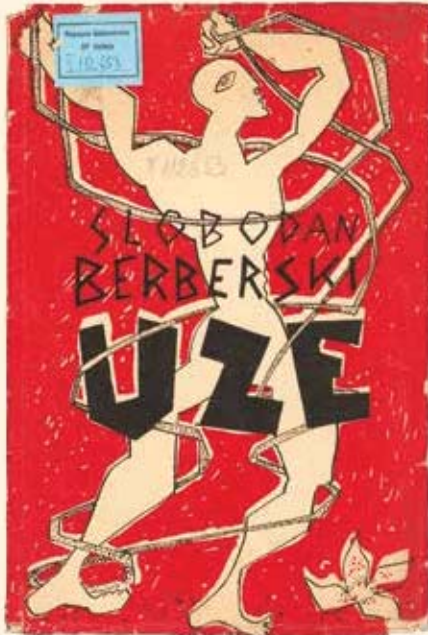
ski, a partisan and comrade of the Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito and a member of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, was a pioneer in both the Roma movement and Roma poetry in Yugoslavia. His article published in 1969 in the Belgrade-based newspaper *Večernje novosti* [Evening news], calling for the usage of *Roma* (instead of Gypsies) and stating that the Roma should be recognized as a nationality (*narodnost*), is considered a watershed in Yugoslav Romani policies.⁸ The term “Roma” started to be officially used in public, scientific, and political discourse at the federal level and in all republics. *Roma* as a category was included in the official censuses, and a network of sections under the umbrella organization Rom was created within the territory of the federation. The theatre troupe *Phralipe* [Brotherhood], established in 1971 in Skopje, performed in Romani, while dramas were also written and translations of classical plays (such as those of Shakespeare) were created for it. The singers Esma Redžepova and Šaban Bajramović created and produced songs in Romani, and the radio stations in the major cities of the federation were broadcasting Romani-language programs.

A generation of Romani activists was formed that was collaborating within the borders of the federation and actively participating in the international Romani movement. The Yugoslav Roma delegation played a key role in the First World Gypsy Congress in London (April 1971) where Berberski was elected president of the organization and Žarko Jovanović, a Yugoslav Romani antifascist fighter, composer, and activist, played the song *Gelem Gelem*, with lyrics composed on the base of a traditional melody, to become the Romani international anthem. From that time, Yugoslav Roma participated actively in the international Romani movement, and Yugoslavian federative policies were given as a model for policies unifying diverse Romani communities throughout the world. The Yugoslav Roma formed the leadership of the International Romani Union during the first two decades of the organization,⁹ and Rajko Djurić, the Yugoslavian Roma poet and activist, was elected president of the organization at its 4th Congress in Warsaw in 1990.

“A GENERATION OF ROMANI ACTIVISTS WAS FORMED THAT WAS COLLABORATING WITHIN THE BORDERS OF THE FEDERATION AND ACTIVELY PARTICIPATING IN THE INTERNATIONAL ROMANI MOVEMENT.”

PUBLISHING ACTIVITIES RELATED to Romani culture and language were under way, and ethnographic works on the Roma were commissioned and published in all SFRY republics. In 1980 in Skopje, a bilingual (Romani/Macedonian) grammar book was published by the Macedonian Rom Šaip Jusup and the linguist Krume Kepeski. In 1986 the French linguist Marcel Courthiade, a supporter of the development of standard Romani, and who later proposed the language codification accepted at the 4th International Romani Union Con-

gress in Warsaw (April 1990), published the bilingual (Romani/Serbo-Croatian) *Romani Phonetics and Spelling*. The same year, a congress dedicated to Romani language and culture was orga-



Cover of a poetry collection by S. Berberski.



Romani translation of a propaganda book about Tito.



Cover of the first book by Jovan Nikolić.

nized in Sarajevo. Romani language productions with support from the government were realized – including both originals and translations.¹⁰ Topics of the works were often related to the Romani way of life, and the languages of publication were Romani and/or Serbo-Croatian. The federative model of ethnic policies under the slogan “Brotherhood and Unity” for all communities and individuals in Yugoslavia fit well with a Romani identity uniting various groups living in all republics of the federation, and initiatives begun in the individual republics as well as at the federal level. Propaganda materials and content were produced in the Romani language as one of the communities’ languages in the federation.

The federation’s political leadership had also designed policies targeted at building a Yugoslav identity. Initially, in the 1950s–60s, the decision was to build a Yugoslav identity (called *integralno jugoslovenstvo* [integral Yugoslavianhood]) as a supranational sense of belonging that would eventually prevail over the national feelings in the republics, while ethnic tensions were to be weakened for the sake of Yugoslav “Brotherhood and Unity”. This integral Yugoslavianhood was propagandized, and the category *Jugoslav* was included in the census starting in 1953.¹¹ Although the idea of a Yugoslav supranational identity was abandoned with the constitutional provisions in the 1970s and stronger nation-building policies in the republics were put in place, the Yugoslav identity continued to grow in the 1970s and 1980s. A declaration of Yugoslav identity when answering the census was most common among individuals living in urban regions with multi-ethnic communities, people in mixed marriages and their heirs, and some minorities and ethnic groups such as Muslims, Gypsies/Roma, Bulgarians, Czechs, Croats outside of Croatia, etc. Both qualitative and quantitative studies suggest that the Yugoslav identity policies were most effective among such communities.¹² For the Roma – who have always been living in mixed ethnic environments – the declaration of this supranational identity was a way to demonstrate belonging to a

greater community of Yugoslavs. That is why in research among various Romani communities living in the territories of former Yugoslavia or in migration, self-defining and identification as Yugoslav or Yugo was very common and remained so even after the dissolution of the federation,¹³ without denouncing one’s Romani ethnic identity. “Ja sam Jugo, Jugosloven” (I’m Yugoslav, I am a *Jugo*) is still a phrase that can be heard among Roma (and non-Roma alike) with a Yugoslav background.

Romani culture and language were part of the mainstream and popular cultural production, which is exemplified in the translation into Romani of propaganda books and the use of Romani language in the cultural industries (mainly in music and cinema). Romani was the language of the main characters in a couple of movies, including *I Even Met Happy Gypsies* (original title *Skupljači perja*, [Feather collectors], 1967), which popularized the song *Gelem Gelem* that, as mentioned, became the Romani international anthem. These policies continued even against the background of the rise of political, economic, and ethnic tensions in the 1980s. Thus, in 1986 the Union of Romani Associations in Yugoslavia was set up, and in 1989 a Romani summer school gathering Romani activists from the Yugoslav federation was organized.

Romani publishing in Yugoslavia

In this stimulating atmosphere of the 1970s–80s, several Roma authors in all of the Yugoslav republics started writing and publishing. Literature production by Roma authors appeared in most of the major cities of the federation. Slobodan Berberski was a pioneer in both the Romani movement and Romani publishing, and he authored more than 10 collections of lyrics, all in Serbo-Croatian. His first poetry books were published in the 1950s under the titles *There Will Be a Rainbow After the Rain* and *Spring and Eyes*.¹⁴ In 1969 Rajko Djurić published his first bilingual collection *A Gypsy Searches for a Place Under the Sun*, becoming the first Yugoslavian poet writing originally in Romani.



He continued publishing poetry in Romani and Serbo-Croatian in his later works *Bi kheresko bi limoresko/ Bez doma bez groba* [Without a house, without a grave], *Purano svato – o dur them/ Prastara reč – Daleki svet* [Ancient word – a faraway world], and *A thaj U/A i U* [A and U].¹⁵

Another Roma author of that time was Jovan Nikolić who wrote in Serbo-Croatian but published his works with Romani translations. His first poetry collection was entitled *Gost katinendar/Gost niotkuda* [A guest from nowhere] (1982), and he was awarded a mainstream Yugoslav literary prize in 1981. Kadrija Šainović published his first poetry collection, *Gypsy intimacy*, in Serbo-Croatian,¹⁶ and Seljajdin Selijasor published his first poetry book in Romani *Živdipe maškar o Roma* [Life among the Roma] (1988). In Skopje, capital of the Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Iljaz Šaban, a member of the Union of Macedonian Writers, published two poetry collections in Macedonian in the 1980s – *Remembering the immortals* and *The Roots of my predecessors* – but his Romani manuscripts remain unpublished. The Skopje-born Roma singer Muharem Serbezovski also published the poetry collection *Colorful diamonds* (1983), and in Montenegro Ruždija Ruso Sejđović published the bilingual poetry collection *Fires in the night* (1988).

In Kosovo, at that time an autonomous Yugoslav province within the Yugoslav Republic of Serbia, Romani cultural production was part of the media and artistic landscape, including radio broadcasts in Romani. A number of cultural manifestations were organized with Romani participation,¹⁷ and the main literary figure there was Alija Krasnići. While poetry production prevailed in the Roma literature in Yugoslavia, Krasnići went beyond the poetry genre, writing short stories, tales, dramas, and novels. He published in literary journals in Kosovo, and his first book of short stories appeared in Albanian. In the 1980s, Krasnići published in Priština two bilingual (Romani/Serbo-Croatian) collections of short stories *Čergarendje jaga/Čergarske vatre* [Tent's fires] and *Iripe ano đuvdipe/Povratak u život* [Coming back to life], the Albanian language poetry book *Weary nights* (1988), and the epic poetry based on legends and folklore beliefs in Romani and Serbo-Croatian *Zvezdani snovi/Čehrajine sune* [Star dreams] (1989).

In the same period, Bosnian-born Roma living in Italy also started writing and publishing poetry and stories. Semso Advić, originally from Banja Luka (Bosnia and Herzegovina), published his first poetry collection in Romani with an Italian translation by Sergio Francese in 1985.¹⁸ In 1987 Rasim Sejđić published the Romani/Italian poetry collection *Rasim poeta zingaro* (1987). Despite the fact that these works, along with other publications by Bosnian Roma, were not published in the SFRY, it should be noted that these authors started their literary activities in Yugoslavia.

APART FROM ORIGINAL WORKS, Roma activists also published folklore materials. Trifun Dimić, a Rom from Vojvodina, who in 1996 established *Matica Romska*,

published collections of Romani folklore materials in 1979, 1984, and 1986.¹⁹ As a researcher of Romani culture, Rajko Djurić published a folklore collection of Romani riddles (1980) and the photo album *Cigani sveta* [Gypsies of the world] (1988). Rasim Sejđić's stories, transcribed and collected by Giulio Soravia, were published in Romani with an Italian translation in the journal *Lacio Drom*.

Despite the fact that these works were not widely known and distributed, Romani language and culture production was not considered a separate minority culture segment intended only for the Roma in SFRY. Romani authors took part in various Yugoslavia-wide literary activities (festivals, workshops, collections, etc.) with their works published and read in Romani and Serbo-Croatian. For example, Jovan Nikolić won first prize at the Yugoslav Festival for Young Poets in Vrbaš in 1981, while Ferida Jašarević (from Kosovo) and Ruždija Ruso Sejđović (from Montenegro) took part as Romani poets in the Yugoslav young poets' festival *Majska rukovanja* [Handshakes in May] held in Montenegro in 1982 and 1983, and later their selected works, along with the poems of other participants in the festival from different ethnicities, were published in a poetry collection.²⁰

In the spirit of the time of the multilingual and multinational federation, several ideological books were printed. They were devoted to the figure of the Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito and were either edited or translated by Roma activists of the time. Šaip Jusuf, a Romani activist and linguist from Macedonia, translated *We are Tito's, Tito is ours*, an ideological book originally published in Slovenian and translated into the languages of all communities living in Yugoslavia, including the Roma. In it we can read an overview of historical, economic, and political developments put in the ideological discourse of the time.²¹ The Romani activist Sait Balić was editor of another book, *About Tito*, translated into Romani and devoted to the life and deeds of Tito and printed a few months after Tito's death in May 1980.²²

Yugoslav belonging and sustained cooperation

The situation changed in the 1990s with the dissolution of the SFRY. The official post-Yugoslav discourse among the rest of the ethnic and national communities often blamed Yugoslav policies for suppressing the interest of the respective community for the sake of federative ideology or another ethnic community (for instance, *Bošnjaks* claiming that their national identity was suppressed by choosing a religious definition, Muslimani, to denominate the community; Croatian and Slovenian leadership blaming the Yugoslav communist leadership for suppressing the national movement; etc.). The position of the Roma was somewhat different. They lost not only their ethnic group status, but also the rights distributed to them as such. As a result of the ethnopolitical tensions during the conflicts in the former Yugoslav territories following the dissolution of the SFRY, many Roma were persecuted and forced

“IN THE SPIRIT OF THE TIME OF THE MULTILINGUAL AND MULTINATIONAL FEDERATION, SEVERAL IDEOLOGICAL BOOKS WERE PRINTED.”



Covers of the poetry anthology edited by A. Krasnići.



Cover of prose anthology edited by A. Krasnići.



PHOTO: SADRIKRASNIĆI

Alija Krasnići at the launch of *Antologija e romane poezijači ane varekanutni Jugoslavija* [Anthology of Romani poetry in the one-time Yugoslavia].

to leave their homes as refugees. Protection of minor ethnic communities was a low priority for the states involved in these conflicts, and the newly constituted republics in the early 1990s were primarily focused on reinforcing political stability and on building a new and independent state identity. In the states that did not have conflicts within their borders (such as the so-called “third Yugoslavia”, e.g. the federation of Serbia and Montenegro and FYR Macedonia), the established policies regarding Roma in many ways continued, and after 2000 Roma national minority councils were founded in some of these countries.²³

Romani families fled their homes in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Kosovo and became refugees in neighboring Yugoslavian territories (Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia) or in Western European states such as Germany, Sweden, Italy, France, and Denmark. The destiny of the Roma authors themselves was not different from that of the lay Roma. Many of them thus moved, mostly to Western European countries. Alija Krasnići left Kosovo to move to Serbia, and Rajko Djurić, Ruždija Ruso Sejđović, and Jovan Nikolić migrated to Germany after the rise of the ethnic and political tensions in the late 1980s and the 1990s.

IN THEIR NEW COUNTRIES of residence, many Romani authors continued their activities as writers and activists. Rajko Djurić was also among the first researchers of the Romani literary scene on an international scale and was the author of the first book devoted to the literature of the Roma and Sinti.²⁴ Being one of the globally recognized Roma authors, his poetry works were translated into several European languages. Djurić also established the Roma PEN Center in Berlin in 1996, and Jovan Nikolić and Ruždija Ruso Sejđović took part in the civil organization Rom e.V. in Cologne. These authors wrote either in Romani or in Serbo-Croatian, and their works were translated into the languages of their new country of residence. In presenting themselves, they declared belonging to *nekadašna Jugsolavija* (old-time Yugoslavia), the SFRY, or *bivša Jugoslavija* (former Yugoslavia) as their homeland, instead of the successor states, because it was the individual national policies of these states that were the main reason for them having to migrate in the first place.

It is no wonder that the Yugoslav identity was kept among the Roma, and there are interrelated reasons behind this. Yugoslavia was a symbol of a peaceful time with many advancements and opportunities. The Yugoslav passport was also considered a ticket to free travel, and, similar to the rest of the population, many Roma migrated for short or longer periods in Western Europe. Roma also enjoyed certain cultural rights and had access to education and labor markets. The breakup of the federation on the contrary brought conflicts and insecurities, and Roma communities were among the first to be negatively affected by such developments. Thus it is not surprising that a Yugoslav belonging is expressed by both lay Roma and Romani writers. I will first examine how Romani literature activities and initiatives have sustained a sense of Yugoslav identity even decades after the dissolution of the federation. Then I will consider narrations and topics in Romani authors' works that refer to the Yugoslav time and to the effects that the dissolution of the federation had on the Roma themselves using the destiny of the Kosovo Roma as an example.

Romani activists and writers (these two figures often overlapped because the activists were involved in various activities such as human rights, education, journalism, public opinion, and writing) continued networking even though Romani-related activities were no longer state supported. After the conflicts ended, and in more peaceful times, the Yugoslav Roma policies were reactivated. They were facilitated by the already existing contact between activists from the time of the SFRY. The languages commonly spoken by the Yugoslav Roma (Serbo-Croatian and Romani) continued to function as the lingua francas facilitating these activities. The rise of Romani activism and Romani issues in Europe after the fall of socialism also reinforced Romani activists with a Yugoslav background living either in former Yugoslav territories or in other countries in Europe. Developments in information technology and the emergence of new Romani organizations further enabled such cooperation.

Following the model of Romani publishing in Yugoslavia, when educated Roma from all of the republics joined their efforts in activities such as translation, editing, and research, Roma from the newly emerging states were also networking.



Collaboration activities modeled after Yugoslavian Roma initiatives included the distribution of books, journals, and publications printed in one former Yugoslavian country within the other former Yugoslav territories, as well as presentations of these works in radio programs, papers, and events in all of the territories. Ljatif Demir, a Romani language and culture researcher from Macedonia, has been contributing to Romani works published in all states in the territories of the former Yugoslavia,²⁵ and Demir and Rajko Djurić have coauthored and published in Romani *Tikni historija e Romengiri* [A short history of the Romani people] that has been distributed in all of the former Yugoslav territories and beyond.²⁶

Many Kosovo-born Roma writers currently living in Serbia or in Western Europe continue publishing works and distributing them among Romani organizations in all of the former Yugoslav territories. One of the most active in the field of Romani literature as author, editor, and translator is Alija Krasnići. Krasnići is a law school graduate born in Kosovo who since the time of Yugoslavia has been involved in many cultural activities, including writing poetry, prose, and dramatic works for the amateur Roma theatre in Priština, as well as translating similar works into Romani. During the conflict in Kosovo, he fled his home with his family settling first in Kragujevac and later in Subotica, where he lives today. While Romani activists are often involved in various governmental and non-governmental initiatives in the field of politics and culture, Krasnići emphasizes that he is devoted to “pure” literary and language activities and not to any other kinds of activities that might be described as political activism. An author of over 90 self-published books of poetry and prose, he is working to support cooperation among Romani authors by compiling anthologies and by translating works to and from Romani. He is the author of a Romani-Serbian/Serbian-Romani dictionary, and in 2016 he edited and published a collection of 38 Romani authors, probably covering almost all of the Yugoslav Roma who had published poetry.²⁷ There are two interesting facts I would like to note regarding this volume as marking and sustaining the Yugoslav space. The original bilingual title *Antologija e romane poezijaçi ane varekanutni Jugoslavija. Antologija romske poezije u nekadašnoj Jugoslaviji* is translated into English as *Anthology of Romani poetry in the one-time Yugoslavia*. It could be speculated that the choice of “one-time” instead of “former”, “ex”, or “past” was made in order to mark the unity of the federation and to suggest a positive and even nostalgic attitude corresponding to the tales’ narratives of “once upon a time”. Note also that, despite the fact that Yugoslavia as a federation had been nonexistent for a quarter of a century, the title suggests belonging to a common space rather than referring to the distinct states that emerged (in which case the title would have been *Anthology of Romani poetry from the former Yugoslavia*). This is a correct expression because many Roma authors

were born in one of the Yugoslav republics or provinces and then migrated to another place within the SFRY or outside of it. Their identity has always been one of Yugoslav Roma. Svetlana Slapšak has criticized the usage of “former Yugoslavia” (*bivša Jugoslavija*), pointing out that Yugoslavia is a historical fact existing throughout most of the 20th century. There is thus no reason to refer to it as “former”. Her argument, which appears to be very relevant for the interpretation of the anthology’s title, is that Yugoslavia still exists as historical practice, despite the fact that the name no longer exists in the field of politics.²⁸ Krasnići’s choice of title thus refers to the historical, social, and cultural practices in Yugoslavia that were related to Romani literature production and Romani issues in general.

There seems to be more behind the avoidance of reference to the separation brought about by the new political borders of the states that emerged from the SFRY. The title suggests the continued unity of the (literature) space and creative work that has not been affected by the new political borders, and thus the work does not cross borders but simply remains within the old-time Yugoslavia. This can be confirmed by the fact that the anthology presents quite a number of authors whose first literature pieces appeared only after the dissolution of the SFRY. Furthermore, some published their first works only in the Western European country to which they had migrated. Technically speaking, they have never been “proper” Yugoslav writers because they never published in the SFRY. They are, however, Yugoslav-born Roma, and it seems that this belonging would best fit them even though Yugoslavia as such has not existed for several decades. In their self-definition, these authors refer to themselves as both Roma and *Jugosloveni* (Yugoslavs). In many of the Romani authors’ statements and identifications, we can see Yugoslavs presenting a very positive discourse and with a lot of nostalgia towards a peaceful time and place as opposed to the later conflicts and crises. I have not encountered a single negative discourse about Yugoslavia in the writings and statements of Romani authors with a Yugoslav background. Just the opposite – Yugoslavia is often mentioned

with the nostalgic name Yuga. Jovan Nikolić for example would describe the country of his childhood and youth in his ironic and poetic style as the “diseased Miss Jugoslavi-ja” (*upokojena gospodica Jugoslavija*) or “the diseased SFRY”.²⁹

RAJKO DJURIĆ, WHO left Serbia for Germany due to the worsening political situation in the early 1990s, in an interview for the journal NIN in 2003³⁰ stated:

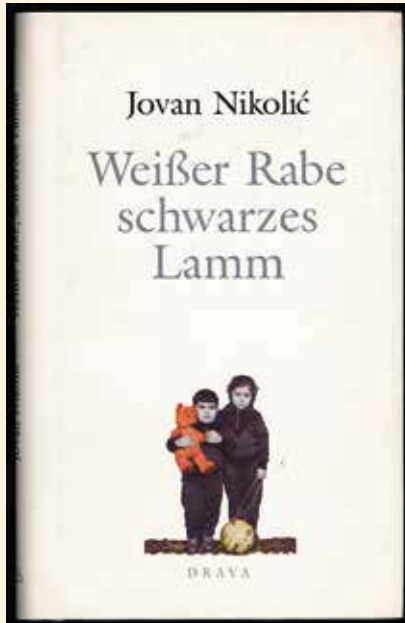
“I, a former Yugoslav, am thinking about my former homeland, Yugoslavia, as a foreigner in Germany, where I am obliged to pay taxes but am deprived of the right to vote, and I feel torn between Belgrade

where my son Branko lives [...]”³¹

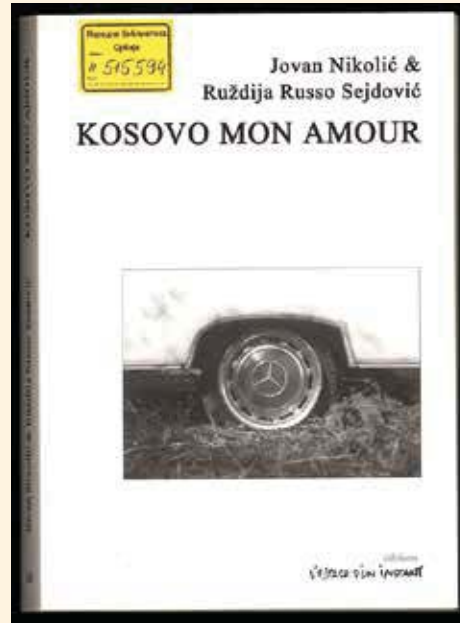
In the memory-inspired contemporary prose of Roma authors, most notable of whom is Jovan Nikolić, as well as in

“ANOTHER TOPIC OF YUGOSLAV AND POST-YUGOSLAV SIGNIFICANCE IS KOSOVO AND THE DESTINY OF THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE, MANY OF WHOM WERE ROMA.”





Cover of the German language edition of *White Crow, Black Lamb* by Jovan Nikolić.



Cover of the Romani translation of *Kosovo Mon Amour*.



Cover of *My Bleeding Heart* by Nedžmedin Neziri – Nedžo.

interviews and essays by Romani authors who have lived in Yugoslavia, we often encounter narratives about phenomena that form the “cultural intimacy”, in the sense of Michael Herzfeld,³² of the federation, including *Jugoslovenska narodna armija – JNA* (the Yugoslav People’s Army in which all men were obliged to serve), *Titov pionir* (Tito’s pioneers, which all children from grade one to seven were members of), *Dan mladosti* (Youth Day, celebrated on May, 25 which was Tito’s birthday), *Bratstvo i jedinstvo* (“Brotherhood and Unity”, a slogan referring to equality and unification of all peoples and nations in the federative state),³³ and especially the leader Josip Broz Tito himself.³⁴ Such phenomena also appear in the works of the generation of writers with a Yugoslav background who publish literature to a great extent based on fictional accounts of their own lives in the time of the SFRY.³⁵ It is important to note that Romani authors’ narrations refer to Yugoslavia’s history and cultural context, and they should not be branded simply as Yugonostalgia and “reduced” to consumeristic values. They are rather grief for the loss of the real Yugoslav achievements for the Roma (and non-Roma) such as equality, possibilities for work, openness to the West, education, etc., and suffering because of the events of the 1990s and their consequences for the Roma.

ANOTHER TOPIC OF YUGOSLAV and post-Yugoslav significance is Kosovo and the destiny of thousands of people, many of whom were Roma. The Kosovo Roma suffered accusations from both sides (e.g. Serbian and Albanian) of taking the other side in the conflict, and they were often persecuted and forced to leave. Not so different was the destiny of the Roma from *Republika Srpska* [Serb Republic] in Bosnia and Herzegovina. While all other communities claimed rights for new political borders for their nations during the conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia,

and Kosovo, the Roma were often victimized and rejected by the conflicting communities. Thus, many authors with Yugoslav background, even those who were neither born nor directly related to Kosovo or other places of conflict, deal in their works with the tragedy of the Roma in the Yugoslav territories, and particularly in Kosovo. The positive narratives about the Yugoslav times in the *Romani mahala* (Romani neighborhood) are contrasted to the conflicts between people because of their religious or ethnic belonging. Such narratives about the SFRY as opposed to post-Yugoslavia conflicts have been created in all genres. An interesting example is *Kosovo mon amour*, a drama written by Ruždija Sejdović and Jovan Nikolić, who migrated from Yugoslavia (Montenegro and Serbia, respectively) to Germany. The drama, which was defined as a “war tragicomedy” by the authors, is about the destiny of a Romani family trying to escape from Kosovo in 1999 to Western Europe.³⁶ As the authors have stated, the characters are fictional, but the narrative is based on real events and the authentic experiences of many Romani families fleeing their homes in Kosovo.

And finally, there are the Roma who write about the Kosovo Roma’s tragedy in the genre of poetry. Nedžmedin Neziri, originally from Kosovska Mitrovica from where he fled in 1999, now lives in France where he set up the organization Union for the Diaspora of Yugoslav Roma.³⁷ In his works, he has been raising the issue about the destiny of the Kosovo Roma, stressing the achievements of the SFRY. His works combine an essayistic style, visual documentation, and literary work. In his bilingual poetry collection called *My Bleeding Heart* and subtitled *A report from Kosovo*, Neziri combines authentic documentation presented through photos from Kosovo Romani neighborhoods reduced to burning ruins and abandoned houses with poetry expressing the surrealistic horror of the events that led to this situation.



Phabol a Mahlava!³⁸

Phabol e mahlava rromani!
O Ibro čerdilo ane čiriklji.
E ljmora roven, dobođin.
E đučol korre, trinepunrrende, dujepunrrende,
O ilo kamljimasko hhan,
O kokalo ažućarimasko crdinin.
Po Kosovo našen e stene
Munnre čheresko.
E feljastre bi ramongo
Roden o Kham.

The Romani mahala is on fire!
Ibro has turned into a bird.
The graveyards are crying, flying.
Two-legged, three-legged blind dogs,
eat the heart of love,
pulling the bone of hope.
The walls of my home
are fleeing across for Kosovo.
Windows without frames
*are looking for the Sun.*³⁹

Conclusion

Publications by Romani authors and translations into Romani were stimulated in the SFRY, forming the most impressive Romani literature phenomenon in the Socialist Eastern Bloc after 1945. Yugoslav Romani authors' production did not cease with the dissolution of the federation, but was maintained, transformed, and even "extended" as many authors migrated westwards as part of the general Yugoslav labor and refugee migration. Paradoxically the cooperation among Romani authors within the common cultural Yugoslav space became more visible than in the SFRY when Romani authors were publishing within the borders of their respective provinces or states within the federation. This was on one hand facilitated by the rise of the international Romani movement and global developments in information technology. On the other hand, the consequences for the Roma of the dissolution of the federation was a topic of common concern for Romani authors who have also been activists in the Romani movement nationally and often internationally. Although we cannot speak of "Yugoslav" in contemporary political realities, Yugoslav Romani literature as a cultural reality still exists, and Yugoslav belonging has been positively demonstrated in the literature narratives and self-presentations of Romani authors with a Yugoslav background. Without denouncing their Romani or national identity (as Croatian, Serbian, Bosnian, etc.), these authors maintain a layer of Yugoslav identity referring to the historical, social, and cultural practices in Yugoslavia in general, as well as practices that were related to Romani literature production and Romani issues. The Roma are sometimes called the last Yugoslavs, referring to them being one of the groups declaring themselves as Yugoslav in censuses even today. Judging from the literature practices maintaining cooperation between

Romani authors with a Yugoslav background, we can call these authors the last Yugoslav writers. ✖

Sofiya Zahova is researcher at the Vigdís Finnbogadóttir Institute of Foreign Languages, University of Iceland.

Note: This article is based on the results of research implemented within the postdoctoral project "Romane lila, the entangled history of Romani publications and Romani identity politics" supported by the Icelandic Research Fund (Rannsóknasjóður) with grant number 163079-052.

references

- 1 Dragoljub Acković, "Le journal Romano Lil," [The newspaper Romano Lil] *Études Tsiganes* 7 (1995): 373.
- 2 Dragoljub Acković, *Pisani svetovni i duhovni tekstovi na Romskom i o Romima* [Written secular and spiritual texts in Romani and about Roma], (Beograd: Rrominterpress, 2014): 406.
- 3 Rade Uhlik, trans., *O devlikano ramope e Sumnale Lukahtar* [The Gospel of Saint Luke], (Parnoforo: Englezongo thaj avere themengo Biblijako amalipe, 1938); Rade Uhlik, *Romane gijlja. Ciganske pesme* [Romani songs], (Prijeđor: Štamparija Vućen Štrbac, 1937).
- 4 Gary K. Bertsch, "Ethnicity and Politics in Socialist Yugoslavia," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 433, Ethnic Conflict in the World Today (1977): 88–99; Ivo Banac, *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1994).
- 5 Miloš Macura, "Demografske promene i društveni razvitak Roma [Demographic changes and social development of Roma]," *Društvene promene i položaj Roma* [Social changes and the situation of the Roma], ed. Miloš Macura and Aleksandra Mitrović (Beograd: SANU, 1993): 26–34; Dragoljub Acković, "Konstitucionalni problemi Roma [Constitutional issues of the Roma]," *Razvitak Roma u Jugoslaviji: problemi i tendencije* [Development of Roma in Yugoslavia: Issues and tendencies], ed. Miloš Macura (Beograd: SANU, 1992): 17–24.
- 6 Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov, "The Bulgarian Gypsies: Searching their place in the society," *Balkanologie*, 4(2) (2000): 2–14; Viorel Achim, *The Roma in Romanian History* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2004): 190.
- 7 Sofiya Zahova, *History of Romani Literature with Multimēdia on Romani Kids Publications* (Sofia: Paradigma, 2014).
- 8 Dragoljub Acković, *Nacija smo, a ne Cigani. Pregled aktivnosti romskih i neromskih društvenih i političkih organizacija i pojedinaca o romskoj problematici u nekadašnjoj Jugoslaviji* [We are a nation not Gypsies. Overview of the activities of Romani and non-Romani civil and political organizations and individuals regarding Romani issues in old-time Yugoslavia], (Beograd: Rrominterpress, 2001).
- 9 Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov, "The Roma – a Nation without a State? Historical Background and Contemporary Tendencies," *Nationalism Across the Globe: An Overview of the Nationalism of State-endowed and Stateless Nations*, ed. Wojciech Burszta, Tomasz Kamusella, and Sebastian Wojciechowski (Poznan: School of Humanities and Journalism, 2005): 433–455.
- 10 Dragoljub Acković, *Istorija informisanja Roma u Jugoslaviji: 1935–'94* [History of the information of the Roma in Yugoslavia: 1935–'94], (Novi Sad: Društvo Vojvodine za jezik i književnost Roma/ Beograd: Romski Kulturni Klub, 1994).
- 11 Randy Hodson, Dusko Sekulic, and Garth Massey, "National Tolerance in

- the Former Yugoslavia," *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 99 (1994): 1534–1558.
- 12 Hans Grandits, "Dynamics of Socialist Nation-Building: The Short Lived Programme of Promoting a Yugoslav National Identity and Some Comparative Perspectives," *New and Ambiguous Nation-building Processes in South-Eastern Europe. Working Papers Collection*, ed. Rozita Dimova, Hannes Grandits, Ulf Brunnbauer, and Holm Sundhaussen (Berlin: Graz, 2008): 15–28.
- 13 Tanja Petrović, "The Territory of the Former Yugoslavia in the "Mental Maps" of Former Yugoslavs: Nostalgia for Space," *Sprawy Narodowościowe*, Vol. 31 (2007): 263–273.
- 14 Slobodan Berberski. *Za kišom biće duga* [There will be a rainbow after the rain] (Zagreb: Mlado Pokolenje, 1950); Slobodan Berberski, *Proleće i oči* [Spring and eyes], (Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 1952).
- 15 Rajko Djurić, *Rom rodel than talav kham* (Beograd: Narodna knjiga, 1969); Rajko Djurić, *Bi kheresko bi limoresko/ Bez doma bez groba* (Beograd: Nolit, 1979); Rajko Djurić, *Purano svato o dur them/ Prastara reč daleki svet* (Beograd: Narodna knjiga, 1980); Rajko Djurić, *A thaj U/ A i U* (Beograd: Narodna Knjiga, 1982).
- 16 Kadrija Šainović, *Ciganske intime* [Gypsy intimacy], (Kruševac: Bogdala, 1975).
- 17 Marcel Courthiade "Between Oral and Written Textuality: the Lila of the Young Romani Poets in Kosovia," *Lacio Drom* 6 (1985): 2–20.
- 18 Šemso Advić, *Poesie*, edited and translated by Sergio Francese (Cuneo: Primalpe, 1985).
- 19 Trifun Dimić, *Kana avavas ando foro – Dolazeći sa vašara* [Coming back from the market], (Novi Sad: Irig, 1979); Trifun Dimić, *Romane Romaja, Sovlimata thaj Bahtarimate. Narodne romske Kletve, zakletve i blagoslovi* [Romani folk curses, oaths, and blessings], (Novi Sad: Edition Strazilovo/ Sprska Citaonica i Knjiznica Irig, 1985); Trifun Dimić, *Čidimata e Romane Diljendar – Romska narodna poezija* [Collection of Romani songs], (Novi Sad: Matica Srpska, 1986).
- 20 *MAJSKA rukovanja: Festival mladih pesnika Jugoslavije* [Handshakes in May: Festival of young Yugoslav poets], (Titograd: Budo Tomović, 1985).
- 21 Drago Zdunić, Niro Vavpotić, and Tone Pavcek. *Amen sam e Titoske, O Tito si amaro* [We are Tito's, Tito is ours] translated into Romani by Šaip Jusuf et al. (Ljubljana: Univerzum, 1978).
- 22 Sait Balić, ed., *Po Tito* [About Tito], (Yugoslavia: Prosveta, 1980).
- 23 Vassilis Petsinis, "Vojvodina's National Minorities: Current Realities and Future Prospects," *Spaces of Identity*, vol. 3 (2003): 1–37.
- 24 Rajko Djurić, *Die Literatur der Sinti und Roma* [The literature of Sinti and Roma], (Berlin: Edition Parabolis, 2002).
- 25 Ljatif Demir, Nevsija Durmiš, and Fatime Demir, *Romsko-crnogorski i crnogorski romski rječnik* [Romani-Montenegrin and Montenegrin-Romani vocabulary], (Podgorica: Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva 2015); Veljko Kajtazi, ed., *Međunarodni dan sjećanja na romske žrtve holokausta/ International Roma Holocaust Remembrance Day/ Maškarthemutno dives e liparipasko e Rromane viktimongo katar samudaripen: Romsko Groblje Uštica Jasenovac* translated into Romani by Ljatif Demir (Zagreb: Savez Roma u Republici Hrvatskoj "Kali Sara", 2016).
- 26 Rajko Djurić, Latif Mefailleskoro Demir, eds., *Tikni istorija e Romengiri. Kratka istorija na Romite* [A short history of the Romani people], (Skopje: RKEC Darhia, 2005).
- 27 Alija Krasnići, ed., *Antologija e romane poezijači ane varekanutni Jugoslavija. Antologija romske poezije u nekadašnoj Jugoslaviji* [Anthology of Romani poetry from old-time Yugoslavia], (Subotica: Rromane pustika – Romske knjige, 2016).
- 28 Svetlana Slapšak, "Jugonostalgija i smeh," *Peščanik.net*. Available December 13, 2008, <http://pescanik.net/jugonostalgija-i-smeh/>.
- 29 Jovan Nikolić, *Soba s točkom* [Room with a point], (Beograd: Cigoja, 2011).
- 30 Rajko Djurić, "Od Beograda do Berlina," [From Belgrade to Berlin] *NIN*, no. 27. Available February 19, 2003.
- 31 Ja, bivši Jugosloven, dok razmišljam o mojoj bivšoj domovini, Jugoslaviji, kao tuđinac, u Nemačkoj, gde sam obavezan plaćati porez, ali lišen prava da učestvujem u političkim izborima, osećam da sam raspet između Beograda, gde živi moj sin Branko [...]
- 32 Michael Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation State* (New York: Routledge, 2005).
- 33 Iris Adrić, Vladimir Arsentijević, and Porpe Matic, eds., *Leksikon Yu mitologije* [Lexicon of Yu-Mythology], (Belgrade: Rende/Zagreb: Postscriptum, 2004); Zala Volčić "Yugo-nostalgia: Cultural Memory and Media in the Former Yugoslavia," *Critical Studies of Mass Communication*, Vol. 24 (2007): 21–38.
- 34 Mitja Velikonja, *Titostalgia – A Study of Nostalgia for Josip Broz* (Ljubljana: Peace Institute – Mirovni inštitut, 2008).
- 35 Monica Popescu, "Imaging the Past: Cultural Memory in Dubravka Ugresic's *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*," *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 39 (2007): 336–356; Tatjana Aleksić, "Disintegrating Narratives and Nostalgia in Post-Yugoslav Postmodern Fiction," in *Balkan Literatures in the Era of Nationalism*, eds. Murat Belge and Jale Parla (Istanbul: Bilgi University Press, 2009): 3–14.
- 36 Jovan Nikolić et Ruždija Russo Sejdović, *Kosovo mon amour: Tragi-comédie ou drame tsigane* (L'Espace d'un instant, Maison d'Europe, 2004).
- 37 Régis Guyon et Nedzmedin Neziri, "De Mitrovica à Troyes: l'itinéraire de Nedzmedin Neziri, président de l'URYD" [From Mitrovica to Troyes: the itinerary of Kosovska Mitrovica, president of the Union for the Diaspora of Yugoslav Roma], *Géocarrefour* vol. 86 (2011): 65–71.
- 38 Nedzmedin Neziri – Nedžo, *Munrro ilo ratvalo. Moje srce krvavo* [My bleeding heart], (Kraguevac: Marković, 2006), 16.
- 39 Translation by Sofiya Zahova.

