Yugoslavia is (not) a refugee country? Refugees between transit and integration in an ever-changing socialist state

‘Yugoslavia is (not) a refugee country,’ the title of an article published in the magazine *Interview* on March 3, 1989, bluntly stated. By playing with brackets, the title unveiled Yugoslavia’s ambivalent attitude towards refugees. The country was described as a ‘large waiting room’ in which ‘refugees from all over the world come’ and where ‘the flow of the poor South towards the rich North, and the agitated East towards the calm West’ had become entangled[[1]](#footnote-1) Despite being one of the signatories of the 1951 Convention on the status of refugees and hosting a UNHCR office, in the late 1980s, Yugoslavia found itself in the position of being – unwillingly – a transit country for thousands of asylum seekers annually, but it allowed almost no refugees to remain. Its steady commitment to not host refugees was bolstered by its unenviable economic situation, which made it unattractive to foreigners looking for economic opportunities abroad. Within a few years, however, the Yugoslav Federation would dissolve in a bloody war, and the entire region would become home to the largest humanitarian crisis in Europe after the Second World War. Retrospectively, it might sound self-standing that Yugoslavia was not able to provide a haven for individuals fleeing their countries. Nevertheless, this position was in fact the result of developments that had unfolded throughout the post-war decades.

Following the refugee policies put in place in socialist Yugoslavia throughout its existence, this article will posit some central questions: How did the unique development that marked post-1945 Yugoslavia affect its position regarding refugees? How did this position change throughout the years? More specifically, a central question here relates to the duration of the refugees’ time in the country. How were the concepts of ‘transit’ and ‘integration’ constructed, made, and unmade by state actors (primarily Yugoslavia, but also other states)? What geopolitical and domestic factors contributed to shaping the Yugoslav position? What room was there to manoeuvre for refugees whose plans, futures, and aspirations were at stake?

While refugee studies have investigated the process of ‘labelling’ refugees, scholars have so far hesitated in engaging with the categories states ascribed to themselves or that were imposed on them from outside.[[2]](#footnote-2) Nevertheless, the politicisation of the concept of transit migration has been a topic of research. The usage of this label in particular is very much connected with a new phase that began with the end of the Cold War and the European Union’s efforts to externalise migration;[[3]](#footnote-4) yet, the notion of transit countries had already emerged during the early Cold War. As some studies have shown, at that time the label of transit country was being strategically deployed by governments in the primary countries providing temporary refuge to refugees awaiting to be resettled.[[4]](#footnote-5)

It is certainly true that the international refugee regime put in place during the Cold War allowed for relatively smooth resettlement and made the length of the refugees’ stay in transit countries relatively short when compared with the current situation. The dramatic increase in the number of refugees in the 1980s and the obvious flaws in the resettlement mechanisms were a prelude to the tightening of procedures regulating the EU’s refugee-admission policies in the early 1990s. Since the establishment of the Schengen zone in Europe, the concept of a transit country has been subject to a gradual process of othering by its application mostly to non-EU states, while the term transit migration has become a synonym for illegal migration.[[5]](#footnote-7) This was not the case during the Cold War, when transit countries were integrated within a common mechanism of resettlement.

Yet some of the elements that characterised transit countries are recurrent in different historical periods. Despite the emergence of increasingly nonlinear migration paths, with blurred boundaries between transient and permanent migration,[[6]](#footnote-8) transit countries are conspicuous spaces that intentionally produce temporariness and fluidity to avoid becoming final destinations for migrants originally heading somewhere else.[[7]](#footnote-10) Rather than being the result of neglect, destitution and lack of opportunities would become part of a deliberate strategy for host states to make refugees feel unwelcome. This article focuses not only the mere condition of being a place of passage for individuals on the move, but on the implication the notion of ‘being a transit country’ suggests. In fact, a state agreeing to play the role of a transit country does not mean that its borders are equally open to all refugee groups. This topic has been dramatically brought to the fore with the differing responses offered since 2022 to Ukrainian refugees compared to non-Europeans coming from other war-torn countries.

Scholarship has shown that a binary migration system, with significant rights awarded to European refugees only, is rooted in the post-Second World War refugee regime and in the geographical limitation that circumscribed the application of the 1951 Convention to those fleeing from Europe. The cases of the two other main transit countries bordering Yugoslavia, Austria and Italy, are telling. In Austria, this affected the implementation of policies regarded as universalist. In Italy, however, which did not lift its geographical limitation until 1989, a racialised approach to refugee policy was codified by norms and obligations.[[8]](#footnote-12) This article will engage with the case of socialist Yugoslavia, a country which stood out at international gatherings as an advocate of the universalisation of human rights.

The concept of transit and that of ‘integration’ or resettlement is multifaceted. Studies on the displaced persons question in the aftermath of the Second World War have shown just how politicised the very concept of ‘resettlement’ was during the Cold War, which then became the main solution advocated by the Western Bloc in order to grapple with the influx of escapees from socialist countries. This was brought to the fore by the establishment of the International Refugee Organisation, whose main purpose was to resettle refugees in countries in need of labour, which were mostly located outside of Europe.[[9]](#footnote-14) Although some humanitarian actions were foreseen for ‘hard core cases’, i.e. those refugees unable to work because of age, family status, or health reasons, the majority of DPs were turned into labour migrants in order to be resettled, and they were discoursively integrated into the post-war reconstruction efforts.[[10]](#footnote-16) This was primarily a political project, as the purpose of undermining the Soviet Bloc went hand in hand with renewed Western cooperation.[[11]](#footnote-18) The suitability of each refugee group to respond to recruitment criteria became the basis for the construction of hierarchies of nations, with those deemed ‘good labourers’ located at the top.[[12]](#footnote-20) Labour became a tool to rehabilitate refugees and prepare them for a new life in the ‘Free World.’[[13]](#footnote-22)

The countries of the Soviet Bloc responded to this ideological challenge by opposing the Western-based refugee regime, which was deemed a tool to exploit cheap labour, and advocating for ‘repatriation’ of refugees to their own home countries as the only possible solution for the DP issue.[[14]](#footnote-24) Socialist countries, however, not only emphasised their willingness to reintegrate their citizens who had defected (with the exception of war criminals), they also allowed in a certain number of refugees claiming to be persecuted in their own countries, and considered labour central to the process of integration.[[15]](#footnote-26) Yet labour was a key preoccupation not only for the host states but also for refugees. Apart from ideological reasons, the search for employment was not absent in the decision-making processes of those who defected Eastwards, as was also the case for Eastern European refugees in the Western Bloc.[[16]](#footnote-28)

The case of Yugoslavia is exceptionally distinct because of its uniqueness in many aspects and for how it managed international mobility. It was the only socialist country that built solid relationships with the UNHCR and participated in the Western-led refugee regime while also allowing its citizens to travel freely and seek employment in capitalist countries. Furthermore, Yugoslavia was internationally praised for its ‘open borders’ policy, which resulted in a visa-free regime with many countries. Yet this coexisted with a highly securitised approach to matters of public order and interior affairs along with tight control over border areas.

In this article, however, I would like to take this reflection further by focusing on the pair of concepts of ‘transit’ and ‘integration’. On one hand, they refer to opposite features – the transiency and temporariness of the refugees’ presence in a country versus a more permanent relationship to the space in question. On the other, the two terms are hardly in binary opposition. Rather, as I will attempt to demonstrate, fluidity existed between the two. External contingencies, obstacles preventing refugees from moving forward, and shifting strategies frequently turned transit into a long-term stay either out of necessity or deliberate choice. Similarly, change in geopolitical preoccupations, newly available opportunities, and disappointment with the existing conditions could easily unmake cases of proclaimed ‘integration’ and contribute to compelling or convincing refugees to leave. Thus, rather than referring to immobile features, transit and integration operate in a dynamic relationship, in which they are continuously reframed and reassessed. With respect to this, I will also look beyond the contingent historical example of socialist Yugoslavia.

The mantra of full employment and integration through labour in early socialism

Throughout its history, Yugoslavia found itself at the intersection of different migration routes. Nevertheless, the majority of those who found refuge in the country did so in the aftermath of the Second World War and in a still war-torn country deeply committed to reconstruction. The most consistent group was that of refugees from the Greek civil war. The case of Greek settlement in the Vojvodinian village of Buljkes shows that early Yugoslav would open its doors to political fellows up to the point of allowing them to establish their own political and administrative infrastructures.[[17]](#footnote-30) Buljkes enjoyed a high degree of autonomy that resembled extraterritoriality, as shown by the rights given to refugees for their own police, currency, and laws.[[18]](#footnote-32) With the outcome of the Greek civil war still an open question, refugees were framed as being temporarily hosted in Yugoslavia while hopefully awaiting to return home if their side emerged victorious. Despite pointing out that the majority of refugees were women, minors, and the elderly, at the United Nations Security Council the Yugoslav delegate emphasised that a significant number had already found employment in Yugoslav companies and farms.[[19]](#footnote-34)

Refugees from the Greek civil war were not the only ones seeking refuge in Yugoslavia. At the height of the crisis with neighbouring Italy, Yugoslavia hosted former partisans and left-leaning workers from Italy who claimed to have been persecuted within the staunch anti-Communist post-1947 atmosphere. In many cases, labour skills were crucial for their recruitment, as they were for the skilled workers from the Monfalcone shipyard, who moved to Yugoslavia in several waves to be employed in similar workplaces. In several instances, provisions related to pensions and their children’s education suggested plans for a long-term resettlement.[[20]](#footnote-36)

Claims of persecution were often not divorced from unemployment, and they were constantly reframed as political discrimination against communist workers. While existing anti-communist biases were certainly present in the Italian labour market during the early Cold War, this view was used to enforce the dichotomy between two different dreamworlds. Capitalist countries were not only regarded as being unable to grant their citizens the right to work, but they were also seen to be discriminating against those regarded as the most deserving in the eyes of the socialist authorities. State socialism, on the other hand, boosted its full employment policy. This was all reflected in the nascent Yugoslav refugee policy. In 1953, at the height of the crisis between Italy and Yugoslavia, Yugoslavia praised itself for not only hosting 156 refugees from Italy but also employing them according to their skills.[[21]](#footnote-38)

The 1948–9 split with the Soviet Union, which heavily reframed Yugoslavia’s geopolitical position, was a watershed for the refugees hosted in the country. Yugoslavia became an unfavourable place for orthodox communists. Roughly 4,000 Greek refugees left, mainly heading to the Eastern Bloc countries,[[22]](#footnote-40) while only around a hundred individuals remained in the country.[[23]](#footnote-42) In a climate of settling of accounts against the few Greeks who had sided with Yugoslavia, the hardline Stalinist leadership in the village of Buljkes moved the entire community to Czechoslovakia by September 1949.[[24]](#footnote-44) While ethnic Macedonian refugees from the Greek civil war (called Aegean Macedonians) remained in the country,[[25]](#footnote-46) integration within what was deemed a kin republic was not straightforward. Many continued to regard their stay in Yugoslavia as transient, and they considered repatriation as their preferred option as soon as the normalisation of the relationships between Yugoslavia and Greece would allow it.[[26]](#footnote-48) Evidence of this was their lack of interest in acquiring Yugoslav citizenship, even though Greece had denaturalised them.[[27]](#footnote-50) As circumstances would later prove, this decision was hampered by the authorities in both states. Greece obstructed mass repatriation by pointing to an assumption that refugees in Yugoslavia had been ‘Macedonised’. Having similar motivations, the Macedonian authorities regarded the departure of co-ethnic refugees who had found refuge in their kin republic as an inconvenience.[[28]](#footnote-52) External circumstances turned the Macedonian refugees’ stay in Yugoslavia from temporary to permanent. This step was epitomised by access to Yugoslav citizenship, a process which nonetheless was dragged out for decades.[[29]](#footnote-54) As we will see, this path would be a steep one.

However, the echo of the two Cominform resolutions against Yugoslavia resonated even further into the welcoming of fugitives from the neighbouring people’s democracies with whom Yugoslavia was at loggerheads. In November 1948, the Yugoslav Ministry of Internal Affairs reported on the hundreds of refugees from Albania, Romania, and Bulgaria in the country who ‘were allowed to stay and work in the country according to their ability.’[[30]](#footnote-56) In the early 1950s, communities were formed according to national belonging, with refugees coming from Albania, Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania. After undergoing a process to ascertain their identity, they were resettled in the sensitive areas bordering their former countries to be used to infiltrate or serve as tools for pressure. The most striking case is that of Albanian refugees, who were caught in the middle of the serpentine relations between Yugoslavia and Albania. They were allowed to resettle in the areas inhabited by the Albanian minority – Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro – from which they could leave only with a police permit.[[31]](#footnote-58) Refugees were granted their own newspaper and, in some cases, provided with plots of land and scholarships. This went so far as the creation of a labour brigade and the formation of army units ready to be dispatched to Albania.[[32]](#footnote-60) In the highly securitised environment that marked the aftermath of the 1948 crisis, refugees who could be exploited for intelligence purposes against the neighbouring people’s democracies were awarded with a permanent place in the country. All available sources agree that the activities organised by Dušan Mugoša, a former Yugoslav partisan leader and one of the promoters of the antifascist liberation movement in Albania, were aimed at destabilising the neighbouring country.[[33]](#footnote-62)

The situation for other refuge communities was not very different, with the same Mugoša entrusted with creating national committees and placing intelligence officers at the top.[[34]](#footnote-64) The engagement even used refugees as pawns in insurrectional activities against their own countries. At one particular meeting, Mugoša addressed Romanian refugees as the future liberators of their country with the support of Yugoslav partisans,[[35]](#footnote-66) while a report mentioned the former Yugoslav partisan hero Svetozar Vukmanović Tempo as being in charge of paramilitary issues.[[36]](#footnote-68) Only assumptions can be made as to how far these plans went. In the same instance, Mugoša criticised those who had left for the West while praising Albanian refugees for having settled down.[[37]](#footnote-70) In fact, in the gloomy post-1948 atmosphere a dichotomy between transit and integration of refugees was already emerging. In particular, the political role ascribed to refugees determined the length of their planned stay in the country. Those who were deemed useful for Yugoslav interests were encouraged or compelled to remain in the country. Conversely, refugees regarded as disloyal were initially imprisoned or kept in closed facilities to be allowed to emigrate West at a later date.[[38]](#footnote-72) By 1951, thousands of refugees from the Soviet Bloc had already reached Trieste, which was under Anglo-American administration.[[39]](#footnote-74)

Show and a reality: refugees from the Eastern Bloc between bilateral relations and the international refugee regime

Yugoslavia, which had presented itself since the end of Second World War as one of the Soviet Union’s staunchest allies, experienced a most spectacular change in foreign policy after 1948. The split with the Soviet Union and the consequent rapprochement with the capitalist bloc led to the country’s gradual integration into the Western-led refugee regime. Starting in the early 1950s, Yugoslavia had established contacts with the UNHCR and participated in the drafting of the 1951 Refugee Convention. Refugees ceased to be exclusively a matter of internal affairs, and their presence in Yugoslavia came into the international spotlight.

In August 1951, Yugoslavia, which had started recruiting skilled workers abroad after the Second World War ended,[[40]](#footnote-76) presented itself internationally as a potential country for integration, stressing its need for labour in all economic sectors – in a country where, as they argued, ‘there is no unemployment’– and the equality with Yugoslav citizens that refugees allegedly enjoyed.[[41]](#footnote-78) In international gatherings, social rights such as the access to employment and accommodation were described as the core of the Yugoslav refugee policy, a view that coexisted with a restrictive approach to individual rights demonstrated by, for example, limitations on freedom of movement.[[42]](#footnote-80) Equal access to employment and social welfare for both political refugees and Yugoslav citizens was framed as a key aspect in a socialist conceptualisation for managing refugees. Yet, labour was not only a pillar in the construction of socialist ideologies, which was both a right and a duty for every able-bodied citizen and, by extension, those who happened to be hosted by a socialist society.[[43]](#footnote-82) Labour-related issues were also one of the battlefields between Eastern and Western understandings of refugee issues.[[44]](#footnote-84)

Nonetheless, the initial steps undertaken for the construction of self-managed socialism resulted in an increase in unemployment, which had already reached 6–7% by 1952.[[45]](#footnote-86) The League of the Communists’ acknowledgement of unemployment in a socialist society did not initially affect the image the country had projected abroad. In the early 1950s, Yugoslavia kept to the state socialism mantra of full employment as one of its main achievements. Similarly, in international gatherings, it continued endorsing a stance similar to the Soviet one by labelling the resettlement endeavours undertaken by international agencies as exploitation of the labour force.[[46]](#footnote-88)

In the early 1950s, Jacques Vernant, the author of a seminal survey on refugees in the first post-war decade, described Yugoslavia’s refugee policy as ‘liberal’, stressing that refugees from neighbouring countries were ‘encouraged to work, and are helped to find employment for which they are suited and qualified’. Drawing on information provided by the Yugoslav authorities, he stated that many of them were able to find a job within few days or at most a month after their arrival.[[47]](#footnote-90) Vernant, who regarded the right to work as one of the key issues for refugee management, praised the Yugoslav government for creating conditions for integrating refugees in a way that was much more effective than Western European countries, and he uncritically voiced the Yugoslav claim that their system was doing better than the UNHCR.[[48]](#footnote-92) Vernant’s observations and claim that refugees enjoyed full freedom in Yugoslavia stood in stark contrast to the securitised management and exploitation of refugees for intelligence purposes. Nevertheless, it testified to the appeal of the Yugoslav claim of providing a durable solution for refugees through labour integration. Although done at the request of the UNHCR, Vernant’s report was later disclaimed as being the sole responsibility of the author.[[49]](#footnote-94) Yet it still became a key source in the production of knowledge on refugees internationally.

During High Commissioner Gerrit Jan van Heuven Goedhart’s 1953 visit to Yugoslavia, the meetings organised by the Yugoslav authorities to promote Yugoslavia’s approach to refugees emphasised that all refugees were employed according to their skills.[[50]](#footnote-96) Shortly after that, when faced with evidence of abuses against refugees, Goedhart reluctantly admitted in internal communications that ‘it might be that there are two “situations” of refugees in Yugoslavia: a “show” and a “reality” of which [he] would have seen only the former.’[[51]](#footnote-98) However, no action was taken and geopolitical preoccupations protected Yugoslavia from significant interference. It is likely that the UNHCR hesitated to discredit the reputation of the only socialist country that had agreed to join.

Oscillating ties among Yugoslavia, neighbouring countries, and international organisations marked a policy of repeated relaxation and tightening. According to the US intelligence sources, at some point the number of Westward escapes so concerned the Yugoslav government that it considered halting emigration. It was with this purpose that the Gerovo camp was created. Located in the isolated mountain area of Gorski Kotar, it became the symbol of the meagre conditions in which refugees lived and was regarded as a facility from which it was impossible to escape.[[52]](#footnote-100) While Gerovo officially hosted political refugees awaiting to be accepted by a country of emigration, there are references to the Yugoslav government manipulating them further by exploiting their desire to leave. This ranged from ignoring their requests to emigrate to allowing them to establish contacts with prospective countries of emigration, which were later interrupted to convince them to give up their resettlement plans.[[53]](#footnote-102)

What emerges from the scattered sources available is that refugees, whose presence in Yugoslavia was regarded as strategic, also often proved to be non-compliant with the role being crafted for them, as was demonstrated by the escapes reported. A Romanian refugee possibly voiced the feeling of many when he stated that, while Yugoslavia projected an image of ‘Westerness,’ the treatment they received convinced them the regime was not very different from the one they were fleeing.[[54]](#footnote-104) By and large, it is likely that Yugoslavia, rather being than a coveted destination, was simply the only way out for escapees from the neighbouring people’s democracies who had originally planned to head West.

Still, on 5 March 1953, Yugoslav authorities communicated to the delegation in Geneva their official stance that Eastern European refugees were better off remaining in Yugoslavia, which was demonstrated by the fact that they had given up on their emigration plans and withdrawn their applications.[[55]](#footnote-106) However, with Stalin’s death, the geopolitical context changed overnight. Refugees from Eastern European countries lost their strategic value and became an uncomfortable presence on the path towards a détente. By the mid-1950s, with normalising relations with the Soviet Bloc in the background, Yugoslavia decided to rid itself of them.[[56]](#footnote-108) Sources reported on repatriation campaigns such the one waged by an Albanian commission that was permitted to visit the camps and lobby for repatriation.[[57]](#footnote-110) Yet the majority of refugees held in Gerovo succeeded in emigrating to the West. Italian sources were likely not far from the truth when they stated that the Yugoslavs had gone so far as to facilitate illegal border crossings into Italy by providing refugees with money and food for the trip.[[58]](#footnote-112) Another era in the management of refugee was about to begin.

A transit country first and foremost: a springboard to reach the Western Bloc

As soon as Gerovo was cleared of refugees stranded in the country, it began to serve as one of the main transit points during the major population movement Europe experienced in the central post-war decades. Of the roughly 200,000 Hungarians who escaped after the Soviet invasion, 19,587 of them entered Yugoslavia as soon as the Austrian border was sealed. Scholarship reports there were 675 Hungarian refugees who integrated in Yugoslavia, and that there was a specific refugee camp for those who wanted to stay.[[59]](#footnote-114) While Yugoslav authorities allegedly tried to lure some members of the technical intelligentsia into remaining in the country,[[60]](#footnote-116) it is unlikely they acquiesced due to the wide range of alternatives available.

By and large, Yugoslavia served as a temporary refuge for Hungarian escapees awaiting resettlement in overseas locations, an operation which was concluded by early 1958.[[61]](#footnote-118) The need for a swift transfer of refugees convinced the Yugoslav authorities to allow the establishment of a temporary UNHCR office in Belgrade and to draw on support from the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM) to manage the resettlement operations. Although concerns regarding the treatment of refugees in Yugoslavia made headlines in the international press, for Yugoslavia, the management of the Hungarian crisis was a key step in the process of re-positioning itself within the international refugee regime. For the first time, the country was listed alongside Austria and Italy as a country of transit and first asylum for defectors from communism eager to reach the ‘free world’, and it was officially inserted into one of the most spectacular humanitarian endeavours prompted by the Western Bloc. In 1957–8, for the first time, Yugoslavia made clear that its role was limited to providing a corridor for refugees rather than a new home.

Throughout the 1970s, Yugoslavia continued serving as a springboard for a small number of refugees from the Eastern Bloc. This was primarily a consequence of the nature of refugee flows that reached the country. The vast majority of those who escaped through Yugoslavia came from Eastern Europe and were eager to reach the Western Bloc. They were not interested in staying in Yugoslavia nor was Yugoslavia willing to become a haven for a highly politicised category of defectors from communist countries. Furthermore, Yugoslavia had reframed its participation in European migration trajectories. In 1962–3, the country established legal channels for the recruitment of its workers abroad. Employment abroad swiftly became a mass phenomenon. According to the 1971 census, more than one million Yugoslav citizens (including workers and their dependents) lived abroad. Having broken both the socialist taboos of full employment and recruitment of its citizens in the West, for Yugoslavia in the 1960s, it was an easy task to reframe its position regarding refugees. As a country of emigration, it presented itself as being unable to absorb refugees, except perhaps in very small numbers.

The opening of a UNHCR branch office in Belgrade in 1976 institutionalised Yugoslavia’s integration within the international refugee regime and provided a framework for the role of transit country Yugoslavia carved out for itself. In 1976 only 26 refugees passed through its doors, but by 1987, 18,576 asylum seekers had already been registered.[[62]](#footnote-120)

The exceptions confirming the rural: the local integration of Albanian, Macedonian, and Chilean refugees

Despite its commitment to emphasise its role as a transit zone, socialist Yugoslavia did allow a few refugee groups to settle in the country due to a combination of ideological preoccupations and pragmatic reasons. Among the Eastern European refugees who had reached Yugoslavia after 1948, a contingent of Albanian refugees did not leave the country after the mid-1950s. While more research on this point would be needed, this decision was probably not unconnected to the perpetuation of tense relations between Yugoslavia and Albania. The willingness to host defectors from the neighbouring country was combined with a bottom-up strategy that made Albanian-speaking areas in Yugoslavia a potentially desirable environment for at least some of the Albanian refugees.

When Yugoslavia ratified the 1951 Convention on the status of refugees in 1959, it did so from the twofold position of being a country of integration and of transit. The Yugoslav leadership was able to secure UNHCR support to launch a jointly financed programme to integrate Albanian refugees, which ran from 1963 to 1971.[[63]](#footnote-122) With US$200,000 received annually starting in the late 1960s, Yugoslavia was one of the countries receiving the highest amount from the international agency.[[64]](#footnote-124) Despite such a significant investment entailing the purchase of houses and land, scholarships, and interventions for professional advancement, flaws in the integration process immediately became apparent. Refugees faced a lack of employment in the Albanian-speaking areas of Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro, which were among the most underdeveloped in the Yugoslav Federation. Years after moving to Yugoslavia, many of them were still living from state aid and in extremely poor conditions.[[65]](#footnote-126) In some cases, authorities reported refugees selling the properties they had received. Further emigration increasingly emerged as a more alluring prospect for both the Yugoslav state and Albanian refugees. In 1968, out of 2,046 Albanian refugees, only 661 were economically active and only 600 were willing to emigrate.[[66]](#footnote-128) According to the guidelines put forth that year by the Federal Executive Committee, Albanian refugees should have been free to either stay or emigrate.[[67]](#footnote-130) Nonetheless, the duration of their stay in the country was determined by the opportunities made available in the country. Several refugees who had initially remained in Yugoslavia later considered leaving for Western locations.

The unsatisfactory integration of Albanian refugees cannot be separated from the marginal position the Albanians, the largest minority, held in Yugoslavia. Yet integration did not go smoothly either for those who were supposed to ethnically belong to one of the constitutive Yugoslav peoples. In their case, rather than employment, the most pressing issue became that of housing.[[68]](#footnote-132) According to Yugoslav estimates, in 1958, 40% of Aegean Macedonians who had arrived in Yugoslavia in the aftermath of the Greek Civil War still lacked decent accommodations.[[69]](#footnote-134) That integration was accomplished not only by building modern apartments where employment was available, but also through purchases of houses belonging to Turks who had left the country, strongly demonstrates the symbolic meaning attached to integrating members of the kin nation into the Macedonian social fabric.[[70]](#footnote-136)

The still unresolved issues related to the integration of the first waves of Aegean Macedonian refugees affected the entry policy set by Yugoslavia towards others who had found themselves scattered across the Soviet Bloc. In fact, the Aegean Macedonians residing in the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland considered moving to Yugoslavia once the normalisation of intra-socialist relations made it possible.[[71]](#footnote-138) Rather than enthusiastically opening its doors to co-ethnic refugees, Yugoslavia carefully set yearly quotas for them so as to not exacerbate unemployment or put pressure on the available housing stock.

Political and pragmatic criteria were intertwined when it came to determining who would be allowed in first. Initially, only those who had certain political merits – for example, fighters in the Democratic Army – or had family members in the Republic of Macedonia qualified for “repatriation”. Between 1959 and mid-1961, within the resettlement plans, only 76 individuals were dispatched to Yugoslavia,[[72]](#footnote-140) although these limits were later relaxed. The decision to allow in significant numbers of Aegean Macedonians came as the result of different considerations. Initially, Aegean Macedonians were regarded as a core group of pro-Yugoslav sympathisers, so their presence in other Eastern European countries was deemed to have propagandistic value, so much so that their plans to resettle were hampered. Paradoxically, their alleged loyalty was an initial obstruction to possible integration, but it was a different, external political move that hastened their resettlement in Yugoslavia. Drawing on the rising discontent among Aegean Macedonian refugees, Bulgarian authorities in the Soviet Bloc countries initiated counterpropaganda in order to entice them to resettle to Bulgaria, which tacitly meant taking on a Bulgarian identity.[[73]](#footnote-142) Yugoslavia responded by accelerating resettlement.[[74]](#footnote-144) In many instances, it was the refugees themselves who reported Bulgarian propaganda to the Macedonian Federal Executive Committee to advocate for faster resettlement in Yugoslavia.[[75]](#footnote-146) Administrative bodies at different levels were flooded with petitions and requests for resettlement from Aegean Macedonians from all over the Eastern Bloc.[[76]](#footnote-148) Despite these political calculations, Yugoslavia was still fearful of an influx of individuals who could potentially contribute to rising unemployment. Annual quotas prioritised experts and skilled workers, even though the majority of applicants were unskilled workers.[[77]](#footnote-150) The process of resettling Macedonians from Eastern European countries lasted until the early 1980s, and was essentially dependent on housing availability.[[78]](#footnote-152)

Intertwining national and ideological criteria and pragmatic concerns also marked a unique instance of resettlement for a small contingent of Chilean refugees from outside of Europe, whose flight after the 11 September 1973 coup d’état prompted a swift response across both Western and Eastern Europe.[[79]](#footnote-154) Yugoslavia was among the first countries to raise the issue of foreign refugees who had found themselves in Chile after the coup,[[80]](#footnote-156) and it responded positively to the High Commissioner’s request to allow in a group of refugees who had displayed some interest in Yugoslavia.[[81]](#footnote-158) Some of the refugees probably were sympathetic to the Yugoslav political experiment or had already established contacts in the country, while others were descendants of immigrants from what was now Yugoslav territory. Yugoslavia agreed to accept a small contingent of refugees and prioritised those who had ethnic ties to Yugoslav territory.[[82]](#footnote-160) The resettlement procedures went slowly, and Yugoslav authorities noticed that refugees in search of resettlement had become less socially and ideologically desirable.[[83]](#footnote-162) In fact, in the eyes of the Yugoslav authorities, the most ‘interesting figures’ had already left, and those still available held uncertain political ideas and party affiliations along with being in poor health and having insufficient labour skills.[[84]](#footnote-164) It was better that those with such profiles not be admitted. Yugoslavia would finally admit 100 Chilean refugees.[[85]](#footnote-166) Besides them, Yugoslavia would later admit an additional small contingent of Argentinian refugees in collaboration with the UNHCR after a careful examination of their political profiles.[[86]](#footnote-168) In other cases, such as the writer Juan Octavio Prenz, previously established contacts shaped their trajectory.[[87]](#footnote-170) Prenz, for example, had previously resided in Yugoslavia with his family and worked as a professor of Spanish language. The political capital possessed by exiles from Latin American right-wing dictatorship guaranteed them hospitality in Yugoslavia. Despite Yugoslavia’s alleged commitment, however, many Latin American refugees left within few years. In the 1980s, when the size of refugee movements greatly increased in conjunction with a decreasing availability of countries accepting new refugees, the departure for Western Europe of Chilean refugees originally intending to integrate into Yugoslavia would be later used by Yugoslav diplomats as grounds for declining any further relocation of refugees and a means of fostering its image as an exclusively transit country,

Constructing national hierarchies through the ease of transit

The role of transit country Yugoslavia had ascribed to itself depended on the availability of other countries willing to accept its refugees. From the start of cooperation between the UNHCR and Yugoslavia, resettlement opportunities never kept pace with emigration requests. This was evidenced by the brand-new refugee shelter built with UNHCR funding in the city of Banja Koviljači to host meetings between refugees and foreign recruitment delegations often standing empty.[[88]](#footnote-172) Albanians, the largest refugee group in the 1960s, became the target of a resettlement programme, which still had to grapple with Western countries appearing less willing to welcome refugees. For instance, Belgium changed its initial position after deeming its first attempt at resettling Albanian refugees as negative.[[89]](#footnote-174)

In 1968, a representative of the World Council of Churches, a Christian ecumenical organisation, visited Yugoslavia to help facilitate emigration to Australia and New Zealand. But in the end, only 39 of the 500 individuals interviewed were selected.[[90]](#footnote-176) An additional complication was that often refugees wanted to make determinations for themselves and choose where they would be resettled. For instance, they preferred the United States or European destinations over Australia, which mainly recruited agricultural labourers.[[91]](#footnote-178) The length of the official resettlement procedures made informal solutions preferable. Refugees were often dispatched to the border by the Yugoslav authorities and would enter Italy without any previous agreement for later resettlement in the United States,[[92]](#footnote-180) an informal practice apparently tolerated by the UNHCR.[[93]](#footnote-182)

Yet it was the national belonging of refugees that shaped the array of opportunities they were offered. This was best illustrated by the case of the Czechoslovaks who were generously welcomed in the Western Bloc after the 1968 Soviet invasion. Their average middle-class background and high education level made them desirable for many resettlement countries. As an ICEM officer stated, ‘the professional profile of the Czechoslovak refugees was exceptionally high and […] therefore they have had no problems, in general, to find employment’ mainly in Switzerland and West Germany.[[94]](#footnote-184) This was particularly true for those were abroad at the time of the Soviet invasion. Czechoslovaks on holiday in Yugoslavia had to consider whether to return home, and could count on aid and support from local organisations, which involved bottom-up engagement.[[95]](#footnote-186) Some of them relied on indirect support received in Yugoslavia to embark on a path that eventually resulted in emigration. If they ran out of money, car owners were provided with petrol, which they often used to reach Austria.[[96]](#footnote-188)

In some instances, the desirability of Czechoslovak refugees provoked competition with other refugees. One UNHCR officer, for example, claimed that Sweden had stopped recruiting Albanian refugees from Yugoslavia because highly skilled Czech refugees had become available.[[97]](#footnote-190) It was probably no coincidence that no foreign delegation visited Yugoslavia in the fall of 1968.[[98]](#footnote-192) The first draft of the Yugoslav discourse at the 1968 session of the UNHCR Executive Committee drew attention to discrimination against some national groups in favour of others by referring to the issue of Albanians versus Czechoslovak refugees. While these allegations apparently disappeared from the following version of the discourse,[[99]](#footnote-194) they would become a recurrent argument in later negotiations. Once again, bias against a national group was packaged in legal terms to decline resettlement. Albanian refugees willing to emigrate continued to have issues with being accepted by other countries, often drawing on the pretext that, having spent a long time in Yugoslavia, they had lost their right of asylum.[[100]](#footnote-196) Albanians were also the most stigmatised due to deeply rooted prejudices, low educational levels, and having large families with many dependents, which discouraged countries of emigration. In 1971, when the Swedish delegation re-established contacts with the Yugoslav authorities, they stated they were only willing to host small families.[[101]](#footnote-198)

In the 1980s the number of Eastern European asylum seekers annually in Yugoslavia rose to between 2,000 and 3,000. The largest groups, Czechoslovaks and Romanians, represented the two opposite ends of the spectrum.[[102]](#footnote-200) Czechoslovaks, and also Hungarians, among whom were many families with children, usually entered Yugoslavia as tourists. In most cases, they took the opportunity of being in the country legally to submit an asylum request. As one Yugoslav diplomat put it, the image Czechoslovaks conveyed was that of a people with long-established democratic traditions, who could draw on an extensive network of contacts in Western countries. Although they often stated that their country was under Soviet occupation, it was hard to regard them as being persecuted when they arrived by car and came with travel documents and foreign currency.[[103]](#footnote-202) Yet once they were processed by the UNHCR branch office in Belgrade, their resettlement went far more smoothly than it did for others. Since Czechoslovak refugees rarely became a burden, Yugoslav authorities regarded them more favourably. Later in the 1980s, fewer Czechoslovaks were given refugee status after applying to the UNHCR while on holiday, but they could usually return home safely without having spent time abroad illegally.

Romanians, on the other hand, were ready to face any risk to escape the unbearable situation in their country. Many tempted fate by swimming across the Danube. This became one of the most hazardous segments of the route to the Western Bloc, with an unknown number of casualties.[[104]](#footnote-204) Romanians soon replaced Albanians at the bottom of the hierarchies created by both foreign delegations and, consequently, the Yugoslav authorities. Romanians were often stigmatised by resettlement countries for their ‘antisocial behaviour, unwillingness to work, and criminal mindset’. For instance, Australia reduced the quotas for Romanians because of their ‘negative features’.[[105]](#footnote-206)

The Yugoslav authorities’ fear that Romanians could become a burden led them to prevent those with few opportunities of resettlement from entering the country. Romanians were sent back at the border or deported after crossing, despite the mistreatment and, according to some allegations, torture awaiting those who returned. When interviewed by a Yugoslav magazine, a well-educated Romanian refugee recalled what he had witnessed at the border. The Yugoslav border police made selections to ensure that those who entered fulfilled the resettlement criteria. ‘Gypsies and those who did not seem civilised or intelligent enough’ were immediately returned, while all Germans and Hungarians were let in, since they would be taken by their kin states.[[106]](#footnote-208)

Such prejudices allegedly sparked a vicious circle, with stranded refugees being regarded as more likely to commit crimes, and in some cases with the purpose of crossing the border.[[107]](#footnote-210) For instance, at times those caught after attempting to reach Western borders were deported back to Romania.[[108]](#footnote-212) In other cases, misconduct was mentioned as grounds for deporting those already granted refugee status, which triggered protests from the UNHCR.[[109]](#footnote-214) A biased approach towards Romanian refugees was reported by various sources up until the end of the decade.

Hierarchies of refugees were the result of a combination of deeply rooted prejudices, how easily they could be resettled, and the course of bilateral relations with their countries of origin. In late 1990, when Albanian refugees started pouring into the country and their resettlement elsewhere slowed, pre-screening Albanian refugees at the border and returning many without referring to them to the UNHCR had become the norm. When asked by the UNHCR, a Yugoslav official pointed to alleged Albanian ‘misbehaviour’ and inability to ‘help themselves’.[[110]](#footnote-216) In the same years in which the ‘myth of Central Europe’ gained momentum among intellectuals and dissidents in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, thus further marginalising the Balkans,[[111]](#footnote-218) a hierarchy shaped by the admission policy of the Western countries emerged in Yugoslavia’s refugee policy: those from the northern countries of the Soviet Bloc, mostly entering Yugoslavia as tourists, versus those from the South who risked their lives in desperate attempts at border crossings.

Hierarchies among refugees were even more striking along the dichotomy of European /non-European refugees. In the 1980s, there were few non-European asylum seekers:[[112]](#footnote-220) In 1982, for instance, there were 2,019 asylum seekers from Eastern Europe and 110 from outside of Europe. Unsurprisingly, the latter had more difficulty being accepted by countries of emigration. Since most resettlement countries were only willing to accept Eastern Europeans, Yugoslavia often appealed to the universality of the Refugee Convention to lobby Western countries to accept more non-Europeans. This advocacy produced meagre results. The intersection of racial, class, and educational biases dramatically reduced opportunities for resettlement. In the late 1980s, the only Western country taking in non-Europeans was Canada, which still only accepted refugees with strong educational backgrounds and language skills.[[113]](#footnote-221)

Furthermore, the low number of non-Europeans among asylum seekers might be misleading. Even though Yugoslavia joined the 1966 Protocol that enlarged the 1951 Convention on the status of refugees to include those from outside Europe, Yugoslav authorities used some evidence to not present all their cases to the UNHCR. This differential approach to refugee rights became evident towards the end of the 1980s, when the number of arrivals from non-European countries increased. According to rumour, the Yugoslav authorities ‘would try to “solve” the cases of illegal immigrants with their respective country of origin, and would then present to the UNHCR any cases that remain unsolved’. These contradictions materialised at Padinska Skela, which was both a closed camp for asylum seekers who had entered the country illegally, mostly from Eastern Europe, and an immigration detention centre for foreigners who had violated Yugoslav law. Among the latter, many were labelled as illegal migrants and prevented from applying for asylum. In 1990, a group of people from Ghana and Sudan along with a Turkish Kurd submitted a letter to the local UNHCR branch reporting they had never been interviewed.[[114]](#footnote-223)

In fact, Yugoslavia’s much praised politics of open borders led to many tourists entering solely for the purpose of establishing contact with the UNHCR.[[115]](#footnote-225) For some, Yugoslavia served as a temporary transit zone. These included Iranian, Iraqi, and Turkish nationals who flew to Belgrade in an attempt to reach Sweden. Some of them were young boys trying to avoid becoming conscripted in the Iran–Iraq war.[[116]](#footnote-227) Sweden advocated for stricter controls by the Yugoslav airline company to prevent Iraqi and Iranian refugees from reaching the country.[[117]](#footnote-229) Yugoslavia criticised Sweden for only being prepared to accept European refugees. The Swedish efforts to create a fund to support the countries of first asylum were seen as being akin to externalising refugee management.[[118]](#footnote-231)

At international gatherings, Yugoslavia pleaded for resettlement to not exclude refugees from Africa and Asia.[[119]](#footnote-233) It appealed to the universality of the refugee issue and tried to show that the UNHCR office in Belgrade was not well-positioned on the Cold War map to be a springboard for defectors from socialist countries. During his visit to Yugoslavia, the same High Commissioner Paul Harlington agreed with the Yugoslavs on the selectiveness of resettlement countries, with Arab refugees being the most discriminated against.[[120]](#footnote-235) Discriminatory practices enacted by the countries of resettlement combined with limited resources available for refugees in Yugoslavia resulted in constant overcrowding in refugee facilities. In 1989, Padinska Skela, which had a capacity of 160, housed 560 refugees waiting for their asylum applications to be processed. At that time, there was a reported increase in the number of those rejected by more than one country, and some refugees already rejected by three countries had disappeared.[[121]](#footnote-237)

From the 1980s, in particular, when the influx of refugees increased and the local economy started crumbling, Yugoslavia became even more vocal with its international counterparts in stressing its role as a transit country where refugees were meant to remain for a limited time there before being resettled. This same concept of transit entailed different practices which marked Yugoslavia’s position within the international refugee regime. Until the early 1980s, many refugees passed through Yugoslavia and crossed illegally into neighbouring countries, primarily Italy. This practice, named ‘raw transit’ (*prosti transit*), was allegedly brought to a halt in 1982, due to complaints from neighbouring countries.[[122]](#footnote-239) The result was that the outflow of refugees from Yugoslavia was heavily dependent on the resettlement capacity of the UNHCR branch office in Belgrade, and the risk of refugees being stranded in the country increased. When pleading with the UNHCR for faster resettlement, Yugoslavia maintained that it could not tolerate any concentration of refugees within its borders.[[123]](#footnote-241)

This by no means meant that Yugoslavia was unable to control its own borders. Rather, it was Yugoslav border guards who performed the first pre-screening and turned some away before they could submit an asylum request. In 1989, according to UNHCR estimates, 10% were prevented from claiming asylum, which was in addition to an unknown number of cases not being deferred to the international agency.[[124]](#footnote-243) The Belgrade airport, then a large international hub, was considered hidden from the international refugee regime, and new arrivals were prevented from applying for asylum. This obviously had a greater impact on non-European refugees.

Additionally, Yugoslavia presenting itself as a country of emigration rather than immigration served as grounds for declining requests to integrate even small groups of refugees. For instance, despite its commitment to the Palestinian cause, it dismissed a UNHCR request to integrate a small group of Palestinian refugees. One of the arguments was that being a transit country was not exclusively imposed from above by Yugoslavia and was instead constructed by refugees themselves. According to the Yugoslavs, the Palestinians would have left, as many Chilean refugees had done, and instead gone to Western countries or countries where they would draw on a language proximity.[[125]](#footnote-245) From time to time, the UNHCR authorities advocated for Yugoslavia integrating small contingents of refugees, especially those from Arab countries who had already been in the country for some time.[[126]](#footnote-247) Just as it fiercely advocated for its role as a transit country, Yugoslav authorities also rejected the possibility of integrating any refugee by appealing to the refugees’ own agency, claiming that none of them actually wanted to stay.[[127]](#footnote-249)

Heading towards the dissolution: the ethnicisation of refugee policy

In the late 1980s, the stark economic crisis along with hyperinflation, rising unemployment, and an inability to comply with foreign debt obligations contributed to the shrinking possibilities for integrating foreigners. However, there was another element stemming from the Yugoslav domestic landscape with an influence on its position regarding refugees. The escalation of conflicting nationalisms in the country went hand in hand with the ethnicisation of its refugee policy. To some extent, this was also influenced by the European context. Starting in the late 1980s, an increasing number of people on the move in Eastern Europe were national minorities in their countries of origin and began heading for what had been framed as their kin state.

The refugee situation in Yugoslavia was no exception. Among the many who left Romania and reached Yugoslavia in the 1980s were ethnic Hungarians, Germans, and Jews, and they had a much easier path than the ethnic Romanian.[[128]](#footnote-251) Turkey was initially hesitant about issuing visas to ethnic Turks expelled from Bulgaria without family ties in the country,[[129]](#footnote-253) it eventually accepted them.[[130]](#footnote-255) Throughout the 1980s, Yugoslavia, however, did not welcome its co-ethnic refugees with open arms, and their treatment continued to be determined by bilateral relationships with the refugees’ country of origin. For instance, according to accounts from early 1990, ethnic Serbs and Croats from Romania whose applications had been rejected by the UNHCR were provided with identity documents by the Yugoslavs and encouraged to cross into Italy or Austria.[[131]](#footnote-257)

Yet, the ethnicisation of refugee policy was catalysed by the question of Kosovo, which served as a litmus test for the tensions stirring Yugoslav society during the country’s last decade.[[132]](#footnote-259) The Milošević government’s crackdown on the Albanian population in the autonomous province of Kosovo played out poorly for Albanian refugees who had resettled in Yugoslavia much earlier and for the newly arrived.

By March 1989, 430 measures had been applied against Albanian refugees residing in Yugoslavia who were suspected of subversive activities,[[133]](#footnote-261) and in the spring 1990, a campaign against them was orchestrated in the Serbian media. Refugees were accused of having abused their hospitality and committing crimes as heinous as rape, robbery, and activities against the state.[[134]](#footnote-263) This last allegation was related to some refugees’ involvement in movements advocating for significant autonomy and the creation of a republic in Kosovo in the late 1960s and again in 1981 when there were significant tensions in the province.[[135]](#footnote-265) Paradoxically, while in other instances the scarce perspectives for integration of some refugees had been adduced by the Yugoslav authorities to firmly reject the welcoming of even small contingents of refugees, in this case it was their level of integration, also in terms of labour, to be contested. In fact, a second round of allegations targeted refugees accused of having violated employment regulations for foreign citizens, which supposedly excluded them from jobs involving security and maintaining public order and, in some cases, the possibility of carrying weapons – such as in the case of foresters and watchmen. Similarly, other instances of successful integration into the labour market were targeted. For example, several refugees were accused of having violated the law by taking jobs as teachers or nurses, and even as the head of the Pharmacy centre in Pristina.[[136]](#footnote-267)

The rise of nationalism in Yugoslavia undid the previous integration for Albanians, one of the few groups allowed to stay in the country. By April 1990, fifty refugees had become ‘serious candidates for expulsion’.[[137]](#footnote-269) The controversy became increasingly entangled with domestic Yugoslav tensions when some Slovenian representatives granted protection to refugees threatened with expulsion.[[138]](#footnote-271) In the 1980s, opposition to the crackdown on human rights in Kosovo by the Serbian leadership came to symbolise Slovenian resistance to attacks against the prerogatives of the republics and autonomous provinces granted by the 1974 Constitution.[[139]](#footnote-273) Refugee policies became entangled with wider issues making waves throughout the Yugoslav Federation.

Newly arrived refugees from Albania were in an even more precarious position when confronted with false allegations, a negative media campaign, and ill treatment.[[140]](#footnote-275) Tensions over Kosovo also became enmeshed with plans for integrating refugees. In 1991, for the first time in many years, a large group of people from Albania made up of 1,600 ethnic Serbs/Montenegrins and 250 ethnic Macedonians was granted refugee status and allowed local integration..[[141]](#footnote-277) In September 1991, when war had already broken out in Croatia, there were plans to resettle 1366 from the first group (the rest had allegedly returned to Albania voluntarily).[[142]](#footnote-279) Although the UNHCR sources do not indicate whether this project was implemented, the use of refugees to alter the ethnic balance in Kosovo seemed a sinister antecedent to the expulsion of Serb refugees from Krajina to Kosovo in the summer of 1995. Many of them would become refugees again when they were driven from their new homes after the 1999 Kosovo war.

As has been demonstrated, the ethnicisation of refugee policies, which had been initiated outside of Yugoslavia with the ‘return’ of ethnic minorities to their kin states across Eastern Europe, eventually affected Yugoslavia. With the dissolution of the country looming in the background, the right to stay and integrate locally became dependent on ethnic belonging.

Conclusion

This case study of Yugoslavia demonstrates the extent to which the role of temporary refuge or permanent haven a country ascribed to itself was produced by the host society, potential countries of resettlement, and refugees. Two shifts in Yugoslavia – from a country claiming it could integrate refugees to one that (with a few exceptions) became a transit country, and from claiming it could adhere to the socialist mantra of full employment to becoming an exporter of labour – happened in simultaneously and were deeply intertwined.

The case of Yugoslavia was far from unique. For instance, Italy acted similarly in international negotiations: Arguing it was primarily an exporter of labour and burdened by a surplus population, it pleaded for a faster resettlement and furthered its claim that it could not integrate anyone. Hence, from the 1960s on, Yugoslavia positioned itself in Southern rather than in Eastern Europe in terms of both labour migration to Northern Europe and management of refugees. Silvia Salvatici has called for the need to jointly reconsider flawed asylum policies since they developed diachronically in Southern Europe and encompassed Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Greece.[[143]](#footnote-281) As shown here, Yugoslavia fits this comparison.

The management of refugees in a country with tight political and social control was a top-down project in which the state determined which refugee groups were allowed to transit or resettle. Yet, in some cases, refugees were also able to decide whether to make Yugoslavia their new home or a place of passage. Paradoxically, in the 1980s, this limited space for manoeuvre was used by the Yugoslav authorities to decline any further integration of refugees on the grounds that they would probably leave as other refugees had done before ‒ an argument which has been revived in Eastern European states in recent years.[[144]](#footnote-283)

The duration of the refugees’ stay depended on the conditions provided by the host country and available opportunities for emigration, but how smoothly resettlement went was determined by hierarchies based on features attached to different groups according to national, social, and political criteria. The refugees’ desirability was shaped by well-established prejudices and consideration of their employability, which was fostered by the circumstances of their arrival in Yugoslavia. Illegal border crossings cast a shadow of suspicion on certain refugees, which contributed to their perceived undesirability. Conversely, those who arrived as tourists were more frequently from a middle-class background and much less likely to end up stranded in refugee camps. That some nationals were more likely to become a burden on the state led Yugoslavia to replicate the hierarchies constructed by the resettlement countries, an element which became particularly striking in the case of non-European refugees.

In the first post-war decades, bilateral relations with their country of origin were prominent in the decision to grant asylum to a particular refugee group, but with the increasing integration of Yugoslavia into the international refugee regime in the late 1970s, the opportunities for resettlement became crucial in the decision to allow the transit of some groups By the 1980s, as the opportunities for resettlement diminished, Yugoslavia began fearing it would become a dead end for those granted refugee status but not accepted for emigration. Doing so replicated the biases that affected Western refugee policies, but with even more dramatic consequences when they were returned to their own countries.

The demise of Yugoslavia and escalating tensions did not spare refugee policy, as was epitomised by the case of refugees from Albania. Just when the crackdown on Kosovo Albanians had begun targeting resettled and newly arrived refugees, which in some cases included planning their removal from the region, a group of ethnic Serbs and Montenegrins was allowed in the country. Plans for their resettlement in Kosovo became entangled with attempts at modify the ethnic balance in the province. In this case, as in others, refugee policies anticipated wider changes that shortly afterwords would puzzle the entire society.

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