

## “The gastarbeiters built everything for us.” Migrations, Memories, and Emptiness in the Dalmatian Hinterland

Sara Žerić, Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies, Regensburg  
[zeric@ios-regensburg.de](mailto:zeric@ios-regensburg.de)

Ulf Brunnbauer, Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies, Regensburg  
[ulf.brunnbauer@ur.de](mailto:ulf.brunnbauer@ur.de)

### Abstract

This essay traces the intersections between migration, (de)industrialization, and memory in Imotska krajina in Croatia and western Herzegovina, contiguous regions with a long and rich history of out-migration. Building mainly on interviews and recent field observations, we argue that the meaning of migration has substantially changed since the so-called gastarbeiter migrations. In the 1970s and 80s, labor migrants invested, among other things, in new industrial facilities. Investment of this kind is uncommon today because the region has suffered almost total deindustrialization. Most of the gastarbeiter factories have not survived. Yet, the abandoned factory buildings, monuments to gastarbeiters, and the recollections of migrants and their families sustain vivid memories of migration and the hopes as well as fears connected with it. Migration creates emptiness but also new “somethings”. We argue that memories are another important form of social remittance that not only transform a place but also perpetuate migration.

**Keywords:** migration, (de)industrialization, socialism, memory, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina

### Introduction

“*The gastarbeiters built everything for us, we live from their labor.*” With these words, a local politician in Tomislavgrad, Bosnia-Herzegovina, described the contribution of labor migrants to the area in a conversation with the authors of this article in August 2023. Indeed, the fruits of migrant savings are evident throughout the small town and in the neighboring villages. Many family homes are spacious and new. Other than that, however, this region in western Herzegovina does not exude an air of prosperity. Little business activity is visible,

there are hardly any places to eat out, the shops are small, the roads bad, and the inhabitants seemingly not wealthy. The average monthly net salary in Tomislavgrad was 834 convertible marks (around 426 euros) in 2020.<sup>1</sup> So, what happened to the contribution of the “gastarbeiters” who left the area in great numbers, and what impact has more recent emigration had on local economic development?

As Hein de Haas noted, “the rapid growth of remittances has contributed to the increasing attention being paid to migration as a potential development resource by – mainly European – governments, development agencies and organizations. Remittances have increasingly come to be seen as a rather ideal ‘bottom up’ source of development finance.”<sup>2</sup> In the case of the former Yugoslavia, hopes for a potential nexus between emigration and the development reach back to the early 1970s, in line with wider debates around the development of Europe’s south.<sup>3</sup> Many of these hopes, however, were not fulfilled. Apparently, for emigration and migrant remittances to have a development effect, context is paramount, and optimistic as well as pessimistic assumptions must be empirically tested.<sup>4</sup> De Haas points out that quality of governance, the nature of economic structures, patterns of inequality, and the willingness of governments to implement economic reforms determine the degree to which remittances generate an overall development effect. He also stresses that expectations of emigrants should not be too high and that remittances play an important role in alleviating poverty in the migrants’ native communities regardless of whether they spend their money on “productive” investments or not. Migrant remittances represent development potential – whether it is unleashed or not depends on political and societal contexts.<sup>5</sup>

This essay does not claim to contribute new findings to the economics of migrant transfers and return migration. The literature here is already huge, including on the Balkan countries.<sup>6</sup> What we instead propose is to reflect on the role of historical change and how it is remembered. Time is evidently a crucial dimension in the (possible) migration-development nexus. The effects of prior actions take time to play out, and interruptions in the flow of time – such as war and pandemics – deflect the vector of change. However, time involves not only a set of before-and-after relations but also their perception. Memories are a constitutive element of the context that local communities, families, and individuals create and within which they make decisions. What migrants, returnees, and their communities do is shaped by what they believe to know about past migrations. To understand the effects of emigration in a local setting, and to what degree these effects are translated on the macro-scale, we need to consider the experiences and expectations formed by them. This means addressing memory as a cognitive form of experience. Why would migrants today, for example, invest in businesses if they experienced, a generation earlier, how such investments vanished into thin air because of events (state dissolution, war) far beyond their control?

This was the idea behind our study, which is based on a recent field trip by the authors to an emblematic Balkan region of emigration, *Dalmatinska zagora* in Croatia. The study centers

---

<sup>1</sup>Federalni zavod za statistiku. 2022. *Kanton 10 u brojkama* (accessed: 27 March 2024).

<sup>2</sup> De Haas, Hein. 2012. The migration and development pendulum: A critical view on research and policy. *International Migration* 50(3), 8-25, 9.

<sup>3</sup> See Seers, Dudley, Bernard Schaffer and Marija-Liisa Kiljunen (eds.). 1979. *Underdeveloped Europe: Studies in core-periphery Relations*. Hassocks: The Harvester Press Limited.

<sup>4</sup> De Haas, *The migration and development pendulum*, 9.

<sup>5</sup> De Haas, *The migration and development pendulum*, 19.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, King, Russell and Julie Vullnetari. 2009. Remittances, return, diaspora: Framing the debate in the Context of Albania and Kosova. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 9(4), 385–406; King, Russell / Piracha, Matloob and Julie Vullnetari. 2010. Migration and development in transition economies of Southeastern Europe: Albania and Kosovo. *Eastern European Economics* 48(6), 3-16.; Hornstein Tomić, Caroline / Pichler, Robert and Sarah Scholl-Schneider (eds.). 2018. *Remigration to post-socialist Europe. Hopes and realities of return*. Vienna: LIT.

on the town of Imotski and includes western Herzegovina which lies just across the border. Although divided, these areas very much form a contiguous migration region, and displayed some of the highest emigration rates in Yugoslavia in socialist times. Both share experiences of state dissolution, war, and political polarization, and are connected by dense cross-border ties. They were affected by the massive deindustrialization triggered by the demise of the socialist economy. Our article pursues a mainly hermeneutic approach, drawing on interviews and field observations, and triangulating them with secondary evidence.<sup>7</sup> Our goal is to elucidate the microcosm of gastarbeiter experiences and memories to go beyond simplistic notions about development. It is an attempt to highlight the richness of historical layers in a marginalized and underpopulated region, poor in resources but rich in memories, and to give those people a voice. Their memories underline the fundamental ambiguity of migration: it is a life-improving move that involves a loss.

We, the authors, would like to stress that we deliberately employed an impressionistic style and chose a more essayistic format. This seemed more pertinent to the interplay between memory and migration evident in this region, as well as to the complex intersection of “small” and “large” histories and the palimpsest of representations they create in which every problem seems intricately connected with so much else. The chosen form, hopefully, allows us to capture the atmosphere of the place, as the “shared reality of the perceived and the perceived.”<sup>8</sup> We aim to provide a thick description of a migration landscape as the space where “things (human or nonhuman, conscious or non-conscious, single or group) take place”<sup>9</sup> and, one might add, emotions are displayed. We believe that an approach that is interested in ambivalent, often incongruent, and interconnected experiences requires an equally eclectic (or holistic) articulation.

### Scene 1: The Wailing Wall

Hundreds of bricks with names written on them in chalk, some with added country codes, form the “Wailing Wall” (*zid plača*)<sup>10</sup> at the bus terminal in Imotski, Croatia. The *zid plača* was launched in 2017 by local activist Toni Rebić, who started to write the names of people who had left the municipality of Imotski on the red and green bricks of the wall. All these people departed after 1990. The collection of migrants’ names reinforces the sense of emptiness at the bus terminal. “*Our bus terminal (autobusni kolodvor) was one of the most beautiful in all of Yugoslavia, now it’s a ruin,*” laments Ivo (\* 1946), once the director of the local transportation company *Autopoduzeće Imotski*. Today, the terminal, built in the 1980s in a modernist, functional style, gives an impression of decline. The ticket hall is closed off and visibly decaying; a former office space has lost its doors and windows, so that we curious historians can freely enter and read business documents and staff records from the 2010s. Not many buses arrive and depart. Scattered across the platforms, broken-down buses stand like disemboweled prey. Judging from the bus carcasses, once upon a time there was even local public transport.

---

<sup>7</sup> The interviews were conducted mainly in August 2023. We conducted biographical and semi-structured interviews with ten individuals in Imotski, Aržano, and Tomislavgrad. They were conducted in Croatian (one in German) and translated by the authors. For the purpose of anonymization, pseudonyms have been used for the respondents (except for elected officials with whom we spoke in their official capacity).

<sup>8</sup> Böhme, Gernot. 1995. *Atmosphäre. Essays zur neuen Ästhetik*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 34.

<sup>9</sup> Allen, Casey D. 2011. On actor-network theory and landscape. *Area* 43(3), 274-280, 279.

<sup>10</sup> The name refers to the Western Wall at the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

Figure 1: *Zid plača*, Imotski

Source: photo by Ulf Brunnbauer

Figure 2: At the Imotski bus station



Source: photo by Ulf Brunnbauer

This is not how the bus station used to be. “We operated twelve buses to Germany every Saturday, and they were all full,” remembers Ivo. “Gastarbeiters from Imotski and from Herzegovina used them.” Under his leadership from 1982 to 1990, *Autopoduzeće Imotski* grew to become one of the largest bus companies in Yugoslavia, serving domestic as well as international routes. Many migrant workers took the bus to Germany, though it was a long trip over poor roads through Bosnia-Herzegovina, up to the final destination in Frankfurt (Main). In Imotski, in the scenic but rough hinterland of Split, the bus was the main vehicle to bring workers from a region that Yugoslav economic planners called “underdeveloped” to countries abroad that offered jobs. Buses helped to turn Imotski into the municipality with the highest emigration rates in socialist Yugoslavia (and one of the highest in Europe). In 1971, this municipality of 47,417 inhabitants recorded 8,767 “workers temporarily employed abroad” plus accompanying dependents. This meant that more than 18% of Imotski’s population lived abroad in that year, most of them in Germany.<sup>11</sup> People continued to depart throughout the 1970s and 80s. The direct bus connections allowed labor migrants to easily reach Germany and Austria, and to regularly return (though tickets were not cheap: according to a 1987 by the local newspaper, Imotski-Stuttgart cost 100 deutschmarks one way, and a return ticket 170 deutschmarks). The buses contributed to a specific rhythm of life in this emigration-prone part of Croatia and western Bosnia-Herzegovina: while bustling

<sup>11</sup> Savezni zavod za statistiku. 1971. *Lica na privremenom radu u inostranstvu prema popisu stanovništva i stanova 1971*. Belgrade, 83.

with life during the summer vacation and the Christmas break, when migrants visited their families, towns and villages felt empty during the rest of the year.

The derelict condition of the bus terminal in Imotski suggests that today the car has replaced the bus, another long-term effect of emigration. “*To drive a Mercedes was a matter of prestige. The most popular one was the repaš (Mercedes C 180),*” explains Ivo. Imotski was said to have the highest density of Mercedes cars outside of Böblingen, and enthusiasts there even intended to unveil a monument to the car this year (as we will explain below). Ivo, the former bus company director, is visibly angry about the fate of his former firm and the bus station: “*Socialism was good but it ruined itself.*” For him, Yugoslav socialism brought unprecedented opportunities for social advancement. His father had been a petty trader, while his mother was illiterate and had never earned wages but cared for the family. Ivo nonetheless studied traffic engineering in Zagreb, while his younger brother, Mate, became a well-known journalist with the newspaper *Slobodna Dalmacija*, earning the most important award for journalists in Yugoslavia (*Zlatno pero*) and then again in Croatia. “*Today, he is somewhat rightist,*” adds Ivo, indicating the political cleavages that traverse families in this rugged landscape.

Many others, however, feel that they were failed by Yugoslavia’s socialist economy which struggled to create enough jobs, especially in depressed areas like Imotska krajina. The land there was not fertile enough to feed the population. There was the main reason why Imotski had already sent migrants overseas during the period of Austrian rule and later to Nazi Germany as contract workers.<sup>12</sup> When Yugoslavia allowed labor migration abroad in the early 1960s and signed recruitment treaties with western European countries (with the Federal Republic of Germany in 1968), hundreds of thousands of Yugoslav citizens took the opportunity to go abroad for a job or better pay. The 1971 census of “workers temporarily employed abroad” – the official Yugoslav designation for its labor migrants – indicated that almost 700,000 people were working in a foreign country; experts estimated their number closer to 900,000.<sup>13</sup> Extensive infrastructure was created to facilitate this movement, including bus connections and, as depicted in the documentary film “*Specijalni vlakovi*” (directed by Krsto Papić, released in 1972), a special train service.<sup>14</sup>

Yugoslavia encouraged these migrants to return, as did the destination countries, leading to their designation in German as “*gastarbeiter*” (guest workers). The term was subsequently adopted in other languages as well.<sup>15</sup> The Yugoslav government launched various initiatives to lure the migrants back. One of the most intriguing such initiatives started precisely in the Imotski region: *gastarbeiter*s collected their savings and invested them in factories at home so that their families would not be forced to emigrate and they themselves would have a job after return. The first such factory, *Pionirka*, was located in the village of Aržano in the municipality of Imotski (we will tell the full story below). More than twenty such factories emerged throughout Yugoslavia. With few exceptions, they are long closed, leaving ruined factory buildings as empty shells of what used to be bustling shopfloors – mementos of community projects for a future that never really materialized.

<sup>12</sup> Anić, Josip. 1989. Tradicija migracija u Imotskoj krajini. *Migracijske teme* 5(4), 269–286.

<sup>13</sup> Savezni zavod za statistiku, *Lica na privremenom radu*, 9.

<sup>14</sup> See Kukoč, Juraj. 2010. Opreke u dokumentarnim filmovima Krste Papića. *Hrvatski filmski letopis* 16(61), 84–91.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Bernard, Sara. 2019. *Deutsch Marks in the head, shovel in the hands and Yugoslavia in the Heart: The Gastarbeiter return to Yugoslavia (1965–1991)*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.

Figure 3: Shopfloor of the former *Cetinka* factory, Trilj, another abandoned “gastarbeiter factory

Source: photo by Ulf Brunnbauer

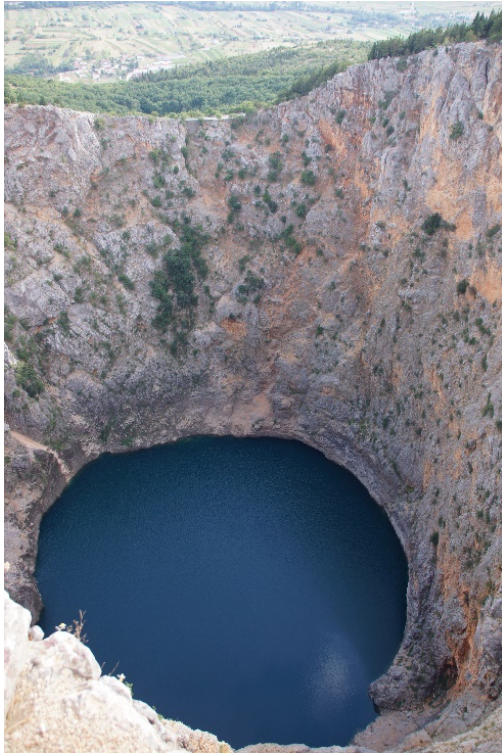
Emigration left holes in the social fabric but also helped to create new places – factories, small businesses, and large multi-family homes built with money earned by the gastarbeiters. These are reminders of a past when people who left took action to fill the voids created by their departure. They also remind of the promises of development made by Yugoslav socialism, and their failure. The emptiness of these buildings today is an indication of post-socialist dislocation. As highlighted by the Oxford-based research project “Emptiness”, *“emptying is indeed perceived as a transitional state by those who live it, but the end point of this transition is not capitalist prosperity and freedom; at least, not for them. Rather, the end point is a radically different future in which those who live the present may have no part. It is precisely because of the loss of the certainty of capitalist prosperity and freedom that emptiness in post-socialist contexts carries enormous analytical potential.”*<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, in Imotski and Herzegovina, like in many other economically depressed post-Yugoslav regions, post-socialist emptiness was prefigured by the migration processes that started in the 1960s.

When we visited Imotski and the surrounding area on both sides of the Croatian-Bosnian border, the towns and villages did not appear so empty – it was August and migrants were here to visit their native homes. Imotski has also begun to attract tourists who come to see its famous karst lakes, the Red Lake and the Blue Lake. This “something” which fills the emptiness created by migration and deindustrialization is the product of the same forces that created the apparent “nothing”, that is, the specific pattern of post-socialist transformation in the former Yugoslavia (denoted by state dissolution, nationalism, war, corrupt privatization, liberalization, European unification, and touristification).<sup>17</sup> The visiting emigrants are only a reminder of how empty these places are during the rest of the year: *“In August the town is full, in September it will be empty again,”* lamented a local politician with whom we conversed in Tomislavgrad in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

<sup>16</sup> Locations. *Emptiness* (accessed 23.10.2023).

<sup>17</sup> This thought is also borrowed from the “Emptiness” project, see the field report from the Armenian case study: Gunko, Maria. 2023. *‘Nothingness’: migrants and de-bordering: effects of post-Soviet conflicts on a small Armenian town* (accessed: 27 March 2024).

Figure 4: The Red Lake in Imotski



Source: photo by Ulf Brunnbauer

### **Scene 2: At Another Bus Station**

Less than an hour's drive from Imotski, in the town of Tomislavgrad in Bosnia-Herzegovina, another *autobusni kolodvor* has a memorial to the *gastarbeiters*. Here it is a sculpture created by artist Pero Jakšić from the island of Brač and erected in 2019. More than 7,000 people attended the unveiling of the monument, which shows a middle-aged man bidding goodbye to his wife and children, who are hugging him. The monument emanates a sense of sadness, separation, and loss – sentiments likely felt by many *gastarbeiters* and their families when they separated. Tomislavgrad (until 1990 called Duvno) was another emigration hotspot from the 1960s onwards. It recorded an emigration rate of 17.2% in 1971, the third highest of all Yugoslav municipalities. Ever since, people have been leaving. Ilija Papić, head of the municipal council, estimates that the municipality has only 15,000 inhabitants, despite a census figure of almost 32,000. “*Everyone here has a Croatian passport. Is that fortunate or not (da li je sreća ili nije)? If not for that, we would have 10,000 people more.*”

Figure 5: Gastarbeiter monument, Tomislavgrad



Source: photo by Ulf Brunnbauer

In Yugoslav times, most people from Tomislavgrad (Duvno) went to Germany; today, they mainly go to nearby Croatia which now suffers a substantial lack of labor created by the departure of so many of its nationals since the country joined the EU. Despite its anti-immigration rhetoric, the Croatian government has begun to extend work permits to non-European immigrants in record numbers – co-ethnic migrants from Bosnia-Herzegovina are no longer numerous enough to fill the voids in the Croatian labor market. Bosnia-Herzegovina, despite its poor economy, is beginning to suffer from labor shortages as well. Germany, always a popular migration destination, has facilitated this movement through a special scheme for legal work migration from the Western Balkans initiated in 2016 (*Westbalkanregelung*).<sup>18</sup> If reality conformed to the predictions of economic textbooks, the shortage of labor in Bosnia-Herzegovina should lead to higher wages and better working conditions there. Yet, this is not in line with the observations of municipal council leader Papić. According to him, though local employers are desperate to find workers, they continue to pay parsimonious wages and treat their employees unfairly. Salaries are low and their payment is “*likely not guaranteed*”. Holiday entitlements and other social rights are often withheld, hence emigration from Tomislavgrad and Herzegovina continues unabated.

This has generated a disconnect between lived social realities and the very visible manifestation of Croatian ultra-patriotism in this area. Soon, there may be more monuments to various Croat heroes than actual Croats in Herzegovina, and one wonders who will fill the newly built, massive Catholic cathedrals. It seems that the decline of actual Croatian communities in this region – “*the schools are empty*”, deplores Papić – is compensated for with the symbolic over-Croatization of the landscape; again, we see new places of meaning reminding observers of the underlying emptiness. The only thing growing fast in this windy region is the number of wind turbines.

<sup>18</sup> Researchers consider this model to be largely a success – for Germany. Brücker, Herbet / Falkenhain, Mariella / Fendel, Tanja / Promberger, Markus / Raab, Miriam / Trübswetter, Parvati / Blažević, Lana and Mirjeta Trmkoli. 2020. *Evaluierung der Westbalkanregelung: Registerdatenanalyse und Betriebsfallstudien*. Nürnberg: IAB.



Figure 6: New Catholic cathedral in Posušje



Source: photo by Ulf Brunnbauer

Herzegovina is characterized by a spectacularly beautiful landscape. Yet, as the memorial landscape and cemeteries attest, it was also a twentieth century “bloodlands”, to borrow the term from historian Timothy Snyder. During World War Two, the region experienced brutal terror by the Croatian fascists (*Ustaše*) after it became part of their so-called Independent State of Croatia (NDH), and from the autumn of 1943 by German occupation forces. It was the site of one of the first insurrections against the occupation and the NDH oppression, and witnessed heavy fighting between the Serb-nationalistic resistance (*Četnici*) and the communist-led partisans. Many civilians died, often in reprisal attacks or as victims of the Ustaša’s genocidal policies against the Serb population. In the 1990s, the Herzegovina again saw heavy fighting. In Tomislavgrad, for example, Croat units fought against Serb troops advancing from the north and Bosniak (Muslim) units coming from the south. “*The diaspora helped us a lot during the war,*” we heard in Tomislavgrad. “*They gave money for weapons and ammunition, without which the town would have fallen*” (Papić). The local defenders’ brigade, tellingly named after (Croatian) King Tomislav, lost 126 fighters. Monuments commemorating the many victims of these wars abound. It is tempting to speculate on the role such traumatic memories played in migration decisions.

Figure 7: Monument to the fallen, village of Cebara near Tomislavgrad



Source: photo by Ulf Brunnbauer

According to local lore, the strong association of this region with Croatian nationalism cost it dearly during socialism: “*There was no investment because they [Belgrade] believed we hated Yugoslavia,*” one of our interlocutors told us. Duvno (today’s Tomislavgrad) and other parts of western Herzegovina were considered a “political periphery”. Communist party authorities suspected entrenched sympathies for Croatian ultra-nationalism. At meetings of the League of Communists of Bosnia and Herzegovina, warnings were regularly issued about the “activities of the clergy and the [political] emigration” from this area, as well as about the “activity of students from western Herzegovina who studied in Zagreb”.<sup>19</sup> Our interlocutor, the municipal council leader, emphasized that very few political emigrants had actually come from Tomislavgrad, but even labor migrants had carried the stigma of coming from a supposed cradle of the Ustaša. This resulted not only in little state investment in industry, we were told, but also in the privileged employment of Serbs in the public sector, although they represented only a small minority. The single option left to the local Croat population was to emigrate to Germany and earn money there. Today, most of the Serb population has gone (or was expelled during the war), while economic opportunities are still scarce.

Ante, born in 1948, was one of those who left to work abroad. He first went to Germany in December 1970, holding a fake certificate that identified him as a trained carpenter. His brother was already in Germany and facilitated his arrival. A German firm with an office in Mostar provided him with the necessary paperwork and off he went, by train from Sarajevo through Zagreb and Maribor to Munich. “*I was not Ante anymore, but a number [that of his work contract].*” He held various jobs in Germany until his retirement just before the 1990s war broke out. During his first years abroad he faced many difficulties, working on a variety of construction sites before gaining skills that helped him to obtain more stable employment. He spent his last years in Germany in Munich so that he could return every two weeks – traveling in his own car – to see his family who had remained at home. In 1974, he bought his first car, a Ford 17.

Accounts like this one highlight the fact that the gastarbeiters’ experience was not easy: hard and often precarious jobs, discrimination by employers, and rejection by societies not (yet) used to immigration were among the many challenges they faced.<sup>20</sup> As kitschy as the

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Kamberović, Husnija. 2011. *Mostarsko savjetovanje 1966. godine*, in *Hod po trnju. Iz bosanskohercegovačke historije 20. Stoljeća*, edited by Kamberović, Husnija. Sarajevo: Institut za istoriju u Sarajevu, 130-179, 168.

<sup>20</sup> See Ivanović, Vladimir. 2012. *Geburtstag pišeš normalno. Jugoslovenski gastarbajteri u Austriji I SR Nemačkoj*. Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2021.

monument in Tomislavgrad might be, it captures important emotions of the emigration experience: loss, homesickness, and separation from loved ones. Not far from Tomislavgrad, in the town of Prozor-Rama, there sits another gastarbeiter, cut in stone by sculptor Petar Dolić. He is placed on his suitcase, his gaze fixed on the distant horizon. At the unveiling of the monument in September 2022, writer Ivan Lovrenović called the monument “*a silent but powerful symbolic gesture toward those who in the past, and unfortunately also today, endured, gave and sacrificed the most, for themselves and their own, but also for their entire community.*”<sup>21</sup> The councilor from Tomislavgrad, himself the child of a gastarbeiter, put it succinctly: “*From one person abroad, ten people lived here.*”

Figure 8: Gastarbeiter monument in Prozor-Rama



Source: photo by Ulf Brunnbauer

Memories of labor migration, whether represented in stone, by empty buildings, or in private recollections, manifest the double nature of so-called “passive” regions like Imotska krajina and western Herzegovina. These places were marginalized, seemingly peripheral to the major currents of modern life, but at the same time migration connected them closely to the metropolitan centers where modernity was said to be produced. Places like Prozor-Rama invite us to think about the dialectics of connection and disconnection, between aggregation and segregation, between center and periphery. Martin Saxer and Ruben Andersson write that remoteness “*is rather an aspect of the reorganization of the world economy and of geopolitics – a type of partially disorganized economic connectivity that radiates not just from the centers toward the peripheries, but equally originates in and leaks out from the margins.*”<sup>22</sup> It could be added that the appearance of remoteness hides functions of a place that can be crucial in other, less visible contexts. Disconnection on one level may lead to connection on another (e.g., the disappearance of industry produces new migrants who create transnational ties, which may result in new investments, thus reconnecting the disconnected place albeit in a different way than before). Remoteness is not only a relational category, as pointed out

<sup>21</sup> Lovrenović, Ivan. 2022. *O skulpturi Ramski gastarbeiter Petra Dolića* (accessed: 27 March 2024).

<sup>22</sup> Saxer, Martin and Ruben Andersson. 2019. *The return of remoteness: insecurity, isolation and connectivity in the new world disorder*. *Social Anthropology* 27, 140-155.

by Saxer and Andersson,<sup>23</sup> but also a temporal one, subject to what Karl Polanyi has famously called “*double movement*.”<sup>24</sup> Transformative processes produce counter-movements, making history unpredictable. Neither history nor emptiness stand still.

### Scene 3: Ruins and Memories of Work

Another kind of forgotten monument is located in the small village of Aržano, a half-hour drive from Imotski. According to the latest population census from 2021, the village has 392 inhabitants, 42% of whom are more than 60 years old.<sup>25</sup> It has an elementary school, two cafes, and a big new memorial center dedicated to the first Croatian victim of the 1990s war, a policeman from Aržano. Not so long ago, in 1961, the village had 1,469 inhabitants, but then substantial out-migration set in.<sup>26</sup> In a place like Aržano, there were not many choices of how to earn a livelihood. There was no industry and it was difficult to survive from farming given the scarcity of fertile land in the karst.

Industrialization had bypassed Aržano, but this was to change thanks to the *gastarbeiters*. In 1970, the textile factory *Pionirka* opened in the village. It was the first so-called *devizna fabrika* in Yugoslavia and the result of a Polanyian double movement: when migrants realized that the state would do nothing to prevent the village’s complete depopulation, they launched their own initiative which would serve as a model for others as well. Workers employed in the textile industry abroad wanted to spare their kin this alienating experience and put together money to open a factory back home. It is no coincidence that the first factory paid by remittances was opened here. Ivo Baučić, then director of the Center for the Study of Migration in Zagreb, emphasized that it was characteristic for migrants from this particular area to invest a large part of their savings. He pointed out that there was no such big surge to invest personal savings in other areas of Yugoslavia.<sup>27</sup> Patriotism is not always an empty rhetoric gesture.

Figure 9: Inside the former *Pionirka* factory, Aržano



Source: photo by Sara Žerić

The appearance of the first “remittance factory” was widely covered. The Split-based newspaper *Slobodna Dalmacija* emphasized that this was the first factory in Yugoslavia built

<sup>23</sup> Saxer and Andersson, *The return of remoteness*.

<sup>24</sup> See Block, Fred. 2008. Polanyi's double movement and the reconstruction of critical theory. *Revue Interventions économiques* 38, 1-17.

<sup>25</sup> Državni zavod za statistiku. 2021. *Popis stanovništva 2021* (accessed: 27 March 2024).

<sup>26</sup> Gelo, Jakov. 1998. *Narodnosni i vjerski sastav stanovništva Hrvatske, 1880-1991: Po naseljima*. Zagreb: Državni zavod za statistiku Republike Hrvatske.

<sup>27</sup> Baučić, Ivo. Neke specifičnosti Imotskih migracija. *Imotska krajina*, 1 April 1980, 5.

by villagers voluntarily and with their own funds.<sup>28</sup> Even the Second German Television, ZDF, produced a documentary on the initiative in 1974.<sup>29</sup> The construction of the factory was decided in a local referendum on so-called “self-contributions” held on January 20, 1969. Of the 720 registered voters, 625 came out to vote. 603 of them voted in favor of self-contribution (*samodoprinos*, a kind of voluntary tax levied on a local level for specific purposes), and 22 against.<sup>30</sup> The self-contribution rates were as follows: each employee abroad paid 500 deutschmarks, each employee in Aržano 1,000 new dinars, and farmers submitted 2.5% of their total income. Since the village had many emigrants, it is clear that they were instrumental in constructing the factory. According to official data, a total of 500 people abroad contributed to the building.<sup>31</sup> Almost every *gastarbeiter* from Aržano seems to have obliged and “self-contributed”.

How are the factory and the whole initiative remembered today? Interlocutors with first-hand experience were not difficult to find. The village is small, everyone knows everyone else, and being able to tell their story was visibly a pleasure for them. Their recollections make clear that the *Pionirka* factory is an important place of memory, associated with notions of progress – and the reality of decline. Although the factory did not operate for long, it would leave a hole in the economic fabric of the village that was never filled. But it also left rich memories which play an important role in how local people build their identity. Kata (\* 1949), whom we met in Aržano, worked in the factory from its opening. Like many other village women, she had also contributed to the preparations and construction of the factory for two years before it began operation. Kata got a job at the factory thanks to her husband, a *gastarbeiter*, who invested his savings in setting it up. She had decided against going to Germany, because she wanted take care of the household at home. When we asked what work had been like at the factory, she answered simply: “*If I could sit at the machine right now, I would get better right away*” (*da sada sjednem za mašinu, odmah bi ozdravila* – Kata has problems with her legs). It is clear that the factory meant a lot to her. It gave her a salaried job and she stayed in the textile industry for twenty-three years. She recalled how the factory had given life to this small area. Next to it there was a canteen where workers usually went after their shift. Friday was the most anticipated day when some women were picked up by their husbands. Others welcomed their husbands only once or twice a year when they returned from Germany for a family visit.

---

<sup>28</sup> Gudelj, Ivan. Otvorena tvornica koju su podignuli seljaci, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 23 December 1970, 5.

<sup>29</sup> ZDF. 1974. *Die Leute von Aržano* (accessed: 27 March 2024).

<sup>30</sup> See Winterhagen, Jenni. 2011. *Die Pioniere von Imotski. Die Verwendung von Remittances am Beispiel des ehemaligen Jugoslawien*, in *Gesellschaften in Bewegung. Emigration aus und Immigration nach Südosteuropa in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*, edited by Brunnbauer, Ulf / Novinšćak, Karolina and Christian Voss. Munich: Oldenbourg, 61-92.

<sup>31</sup> Gudelj. *Otvorena tvornica*.

Figure 10: Work at *Pionirka*, 1970s

Source: private photo collection

The Yugoslav textile industry in general functioned as a social buffer for marginalized categories of the working population, such as widows and single mothers. In the case of Aržano, *Pionirka* served as a safety net for all women left without their husbands for many years. “We, the women of Aržano, were very hardworking” concludes Kata at the end of our conversation. Indeed, the women of Aržano were hardworking, but due to bad management, the factory was shut down after only a few years. Kata would later work as a cleaning lady in the local school. Petar (\* 1950), our first interlocutor in Aržano and a former director of the local firm *Uzor*, explained *Pionirka*’s downfall in detail. According to his account, the management failed to invest in professional development. A long period without new business ideas resulted in the closure of the Aržano factory. The factory recorded significant losses in 1976, and by the end of that year operations were halted.<sup>32</sup> Most of the workers (including Kata) subsequently moved to another plant in the nearby village of Cista Provo. This was also a *devizna fabrika*, opened thanks to the savings remitted by gastarbeiters from this village. Here, history repeated itself and the plant in Cista Provo was closed in 1979.<sup>33</sup> After that, the workers moved back to Aržano when *Uzor*, a textile company from Split, opened a plant in the former *Pionirka* premises. This was the workers’ last movement – after *Uzor* shut down, there was no more textile industry, nor any other industry, in Aržano.

Without knowledge of its history, it might be surprising to find traces of industry in a place like Aržano today, seemingly far from the centers of industrial modernity. However, the old factory hall and the ruined K67 kiosk (which served as the porter’s lodge) present a different picture of this area. In its derelict condition, the factory is still a reminder of Aržano’s better days when it was briefly part of Yugoslavia’s industrialization drive. Today, it looks almost dystopian. The main factory shopfloor has been taken over by a private business owner and is used for wine storage. The rest is slowly decaying. *Kiosk K67*, a former star of Yugoslav design, still stands in front of the buildings – the question is for how much longer. An object that was once exhibited in New York’s Museum of Modern Art as one of the main achievements of Yugoslav socialist architecture<sup>34</sup> now stands in the middle of Imotska krajina, completely neglected and without anyone recognizing its significance – except for local people for whom it has turned into a place of memory signifying a lost future.

<sup>32</sup> Solodna Dalmacija. 1976. Osobni dohoci: Krediti tvornice, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 16 April 1976, 4.

<sup>33</sup> Slobodna Dalmacija. 1979. Jesu li investicije u Imotskom zaista promašene. *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 10 October 1979.

<sup>34</sup> See Stierli, Martino and Vladimir Kulić (eds.). 2018. *Toward a concrete utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art.

Figure 11: *Kiosk K67* at the former *Pionirka* factory, Aržano

Source: photo by Sara Žerić

The example of *Pionirka* was emulated elsewhere in Yugoslavia. Only fifteen minutes' drive from Imotski and into Bosnia-Herzegovina, the road leads to the town of Posušje. Once modestly industrialized, its main business today is a huge wedding center, around which a whole economy of wedding garment boutiques, hotels, and catering services has emerged. The townscape is not dominated by any signs of industry but by a massive, newly built and almost completed Catholic cathedral – which will serve well for the weddings and is supposed to display the Croatian character of this area. The wedding economy is mainly maintained by the diaspora that can afford to have large celebrations, sometimes going on for up to three days. Fifty years ago, however, emigrants from Posušje invested in something else: a factory.

The first initiative to create employment for return migrants in this town dates back to 1966, but three years passed before the factory became a reality. Migrant savings were collected for *Polivinil*, which produced plastic materials and wallpapers.<sup>35</sup> During our visit to Posušje, we barely found the factory's remains. In this case, the industrial "emptiness" has been filled by new utilization: two apartment blocks now stand on the land where the factory shopfloors were located. The factory entrance has been preserved and serves as a neglected storage room for what appear to be the records of the company's last years of existence before it went bankrupt for good in the early 2000s. Like in the case of the Imotski bus station, no one takes care of this archive. A sad sight for the historian: few company archives have survived in the former Yugoslavia, meaning that the history of many interesting enterprises cannot be written – and where there is documentation, it has been left to rot.

---

<sup>35</sup> Vedriš, Mladen. 1978. *Od deviznih ušteda do radnih mjesta u domovini*. Zagreb: Center za istraživanje migracija. *Rasprave o migracijama* 49, 6.

Figure 12: Apartment block on the site of the former *Polivinil* factory, Posušje

Source: photo by Ulf Brunnbauer

Figure 13: Disbanded *Polivinil* company archive, Posušje

Source: photo by Ulf Brunnbauer

Coming across a *ćevabdžnica*, which no longer serves any *ćevape*, but where middle-aged and older men had converged for some late afternoon rakija and beer, we asked them what they knew about *Polivinil* and emigration from the town in general. It took them some time to gather and reply, but then they agreed that “privatization” had destroyed every type of industry in Posušje (interestingly, not the war, in their account). Moreover, they thought that in the past it had been possible to live from *gastarbeiter*’s earnings because the migrants had kept close relations with their native town. Not today: “*Especially the children of migrants, they don't even know the language, they will never come to Posušje, even less so invest in something here*”, concluded one of the interlocutors.

Most of the *devizne fabrike* failed – but not all. Tomislavgrad, the town with the *gastarbeiter* monument, has a second, more mundane monument highlighting the *gastarbeiter*’s contribution to the locality: the TKT cable factory (*Tvornica kabela Tomislavgrad*), one of the few surviving *gastarbeiter* factories from Yugoslav times. In our conversation with council leader Ilija and former *gastarbeiter* Ante next to the *gastarbeiter* statue, we learned that local labor migrants had invested in industry in Tomislavgrad in the 1980s. Consequently, there had been at least four such factories in the small triangle between Imotski, Posušje, and Tomislavgrad. Migrants from this area were resourceful, and apparently also deeply attached to their homeland as is manifest in their attempts to create jobs in their neglected towns and villages. According to Ante’s testimony, *gastarbeiter* from Tomislavgrad paid up to 10,000 deutschmarks to get their children employed or a job for themselves by investing in the cable factory. Around 200 people (return migrants and the offspring of migrants) were



employed in this way. “Before that, people were mainly engaged in livestock breeding, which was mere survival”, concludes Ante. The factory was built in the middle of a field in the early 1980s, symbolizing the final arrival of the industrial revolution here as well. The gasterbeiters, most of whom came from the rural surroundings, not only experienced their personal industrialization in the factories of Germany but created one back home.

Figure 14: The TKT cable factory in Tomislavgrad



Source: photo by Ulf Brunnbauer

What is the secret of this factory’s survival? While the textile industry in Yugoslavia experienced a spectacular rise, it saw an even faster fall.<sup>36</sup> *Pionirka* illustrated this boom-and-bust cycle, starting production in the early 1970s and finally, after some mutations, closing in the early 2000s when its successor, *Trimot*, went bankrupt. Its location far from the centers of commerce and badly served by poor roads was not conducive to economic success. Even though wages were low, they were still much higher than those paid by low-cost textile producers outside Europe. Under market conditions, this and many other gasterbeiter factories would not survive. They depended on the enthusiasm and return intention of local migrants who gave money based on social rather than profit considerations. Such behavior reflected the prevailing economic ideology of Yugoslavia, which emphasized social reproduction. Once return plans were finally abandoned, there was little left to motivate migrants to spend their hard-earned money on projects with a questionable economic rationale. This outcome confirms the conclusion by Alejandro Portes. Drawing on examples from Latin America, Portes highlights that cyclical migration works best for both the sending and receiving country, while in the case of permanent settlement any substantial developmental effect for the sending one is unlikely.<sup>37</sup>

Once the stream of money had run dry, only few such factories managed to go on; according to our current estimation, three in the whole of the former Yugoslavia. The secret of their resilience lies in their particular branch of industry; they were connected to the automotive and metal industries. The cable factory in Tomislavgrad is today owned by *Prevent*, a major supplier for Volkswagen. Another survivor is the *Tigar* tire factory in Pirot (Serbia), today owned by the French giant Michelin. The third success story is located in the small Slovenian town of Radlje ob Dravi: the *Hypos Muta* factory, which produces hydraulic cylinders for industrial plants and application in mechanical engineering. This factory was founded

<sup>36</sup> See Bonfiglioli, Chiara. 2019. *Women and industry in the Balkans: The rise and fall of the Yugoslav textile sector*. London: I.B. Tauris.

<sup>37</sup> Portes, Alejandro. 2007. Migration, development, and segmented assimilation: A conceptual review of the evidence. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 610(1), 73-97, 94.

entirely by the contribution of remittances in the second half of the 1970s. Today, it is owned by Austrian company Dorninger.

So, should the *gastarbeiter*s from Aržano have invested in a different type of industry? Car parts instead of t-shirts? This is really an anachronistic question, since from the village's perspective, a textile factory seemed ideal. It was in line with the general rise of the textile industry in Yugoslavia at that time and benefited from the already existing textile factories in the vicinity. The women who would work in *Pionirka* and had no formal training beyond elementary school were able to learn their trade in a factory in Imotski. A clothing company from Split provided orders and sewing patterns. The gender dimension was important as well: the idea of the *gastarbeiter* investors was to create employment for their wives and daughters so that they would not have to leave their native home. Thus, the textile industry with its totally feminized shopfloor was perfectly suited to this goal.

#### Scene 4: Imotski, Center of Nothingness?

In May 2019, news broke in the Croatian media that a monument to the Mercedes car was to be erected in Imotski.<sup>38</sup> Its unveiling was announced for August 1, 2023. The connection between Imotski and Mercedes goes back more than half a century. Already in 1968, the importance of this car was recognized by Krsto Papić in his short documentary *Hallo München*, which vividly depicts the consequences of migration in the Imotski region. In the first seconds of this film, a father tries to reach his son in Germany on the phone. “*Jure, as I told you, don't bring the 'limousine'. [...] There is no bread to be had from it.*” Fathers advised their sons not to buy “limousines”, but the sons bought the cars anyway. A little later, the film shows a street scene full of Mercedes and other German car makes, which in 1968 in an area like Imotska krajina – where the roads were better suited for donkeys – created a starkly contradictors picture of life.

Figure 15: Screenshot from *Hallo München* (directed by Krsto Papić, Zagreb Film, 1968)



Source: private collection

In Imotska krajina, the Mercedes is a symbol of *gastarbeiter* pride. It has been immortalized in the popular saying: “*A Mark in your pocket, the homeland in your heart, a Mercedes in the garage.*” Like many emigrants, *gastarbeiter*s from Imotski wanted to showcase their success by bringing back new consumer goods. Nothing could better demonstrate success than an expensive, revered Mercedes. Over the years, Mercedes cars accumulated all over town. Today, it is said that every other house has one in the garage, and Imotski is possibly the city in Croatia with the most Mercedes cars per capita. Ivan Topić Nota, the president of the Imotski Oldtimer Club and the main initiator of the Mercedes monument, repeatedly

<sup>38</sup> Škilić, Marko. 2019. *Nekada simbol uspjeha, a danas mu Imočani dižu spomenik* (accessed: 23 October 2023).

emphasized the importance of the “limousine” in an interview with us. He stressed that driving the car was a matter of prestige: “*When someone came back from Germany in a Mercedes, it was a sign that he had succeeded, that he was smart. His rating was then high, everyone would ask him to be a godfather, a friend. They would think that it mattered.*” Today, the streets of the town are adorned with well-kept, shiny (and not so shiny) Mercedes cars from the 1970s and 80s. The fact that there are not many new vehicles says a lot about the town’s economic decline and the reality that today’s migrants will not return (and maybe that these old cars have proven more durable than newer ones).

Figure 16: An old Mercedes in Imotski



Source: photo by Ulf Brunnbauer

The migration history of Imotski is long and rich. Already before World War One, a large number of people from Imotski participated in overseas emigration from the Balkans.<sup>39</sup> Imotski was among the leading regions in Yugoslavia with notable economic emigration after World War Two, even before it became legal in 1963. This long history of migration made working abroad part of the local culture; it was not only accepted as normal but seen as desirable.<sup>40</sup> Not much has changed. People from Imotski continue to migrate abroad as well as to other places in Croatia. According to the latest population census from 2021, the town of Imotski has 9,312 inhabitants, which is 1,452 less than in 2011 (10,764). In 2011, 290 people officially left the town (68 of them went abroad). In 2021, the number of departures remained almost the same: 298 people moved away from Imotski, but the share of people who moved abroad increased to 114.<sup>41</sup> However, local inhabitants say that the real figures are much higher because not everyone who leaves deregisters. The main difference to socialist times is that today the town and its surrounding villages no longer live from gastarbeiter remittances like they used to. Income from today’s migrants is largely reduced to their personal consumption when they visit their native region and is visible in the construction of family homes. Today, Imotski does not differ from other towns with record rates of out-migration – no one invests in a factory. Most young people nowadays go to study in Zagreb and, after finishing university, stay there as good jobs are difficult to find in Imotski (in 2021, monthly net wages in Zagreb were 1,100 euros, in Split-Dalmatinska county, to which Imotski belongs, 852 euros).<sup>42</sup>

The most notable recent transformation of Imotska krajina, after the collapse of the factories, has been the development of tourism – another economic practice based on the movement of people. The local tourist board promotes the natural beauty of this region – “emptiness” in

<sup>39</sup> On that process see Brunnbauer, Ulf. 2016. *Globalizing Southeastern Europe. America, emigrants and the state since the late 19th Century*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington.

<sup>40</sup> Neke specifičnosti Imotskih migracija, *Imotska krajina*, 1 April 1980, 5.

<sup>41</sup> Državni zavod za statistiku. 2011. *Popis stanovništva 2011* (accessed: 27 March 2024) and Državni zavod za statistiku. 2021. *Popis stanovništva 2021* (accessed: 27 March 2024).

<sup>42</sup> Državni zavod za statistiku. 2024. *Employment and Wages – Review by Counties* (accessed: 27 March 2024).

the form of pristine nature can pay off. Tourism is a branch of the economy that has experienced exceptional growth. In 2012, Imotski (the town, without the surrounding municipalities) recorded 5,083 overnight stays, of which domestic tourists made up 4,826 and foreigners 267. In 2021, the town already counted 23,381 overnight stays, 1,562 by domestic tourists and 21,819 by foreigners.<sup>43</sup> This increase has had an impact on the town. However, as soon as the season ends, Imotski shares the fate of other tourist destinations in Croatia and turns into a “ghost town” once the summer is over.

The mayor of Imotski, Ivan Budalić, told us that in the region of Imotski there are currently over 400 tourist villas, all with a swimming pool. This is the result of cooperation between the national government, the municipality, and the property owners from Imotski (as well as some returnees from abroad). Owners of tourist accommodation were given incentives of up to 40,000 Croatian kunas (about 5,400 euros) to build a pool (we will not comment here on the environmental impact of this scheme). These houses are occupied for three to four months of the year at most, and after that remain empty until the next season. At the same time, other initiatives by the town to attract investment, such as the sale of land to entrepreneurs at affordable prices, attracted no interest.

The transition experience of other Croatian towns, especially along the coast, teaches us that where there is mass tourism, there is no more industry. This has been the case in Imotski as well. Industrial Imotski exists only as neglected heritage, like the abandoned, impressive halls of the *Imota vinarja*, once the second largest winery in the former Yugoslavia, which produced wine on an industrial scale made from grapes bought from local farmers. *Imota*, *Pionirka/Trimot*, *Uzor*, *Autopoduzeće Imotski*, *Agrokoka*, *Imostroj*, and *Napredak* are the names of just some of the enterprises that used to exist in this area as part of its short-lived flirt with industrial modernity. Privatization, the new norm heralded by the post-socialist order, was supposed to turn these once self-managed organizations into flourishing firms. Instead, it finished them off.<sup>44</sup>

Figure 17: Shopfloor of the former *Imota* factory, Imotski



Source: photo by Sara Žerić

The post-transition life of Imotski can be sensed in the large “Park and Shop” shopping mall set at the foot of the hill over which Imotski stretches. In this mall, at the entrance to the *Konzum* supermarket, we conducted an interview with the former bus company director mentioned above. Although at first it seemed too noisy a place for an interview, it was

<sup>43</sup> Državni zavod za statistiku. 2013. *Gradovi u statistici* (accessed: 27 March 2024).

<sup>44</sup> Bekavac Šuvar, Vedrana. *Tvornice su zapošljavale 9000 ljudi, danas ostali goli zidovi* (accessed 14 August 2017).

interesting to see where life in this city happens today – within the walls of a shopping mall. When asked what used to be here, Ivo nostalgically explained how the shopping center was built on the foundations of the former arms factory *Imostroj*. This type of transformation of purpose – from industrial production to mass consumption – is typical for post-industrial societies, but here it had a special twist. *Imostroj* has almost been erased from local memory because it was an arms company that produced weapons for the Yugoslav People's Army. It was established in Imotski by General Veljko Kadijević, the last minister of defense in socialist Yugoslavia. This *bête noir* of supporters of Croatian independence was born in a village near Imotski.<sup>45</sup> Although the operations of this firm were supposed to be taken over by the Croatian Army after the 1990s war, it entered bankruptcy and was closed in the early 2000s. The unexplained disappearance of weapons from the factory around this time certainly did not help.<sup>46</sup> However, its closure brought a new kind of emptiness: traces of it no longer exist in physical form, so that no one is prompted to remember it and only nostalgic people like Ivo are aware of its former existence.

Figure 18: Front of the shopping mall in Imotski



Source: photo by Ulf Brunnbauer

But is this non-place of a shopping mall, which looks identical to zillions of such places across the world, indeed so devoid of any local meaning? The statue of a man in front of the mall caught our eyes. We asked Ivo who this was, and he proudly responded: “Well, it’s *Matan*. Have you watched the series ‘*Beggars and Sons*’ (*Prosjaci i sinovi*)?” *Prosjaci i sinovi*, filmed in 1971, is a Croatian television classic. The series is based on a book by writer Ivan Raos describing the travails of several families of beggars and peddlers in their struggle for survival in Imotska krajina. Thanks to his ingenuity, including illegal trade and work abroad, the main protagonist, *Matan*, prospers and is able to purchase a Mercedes car. Because of the restrictions placed on the arts after the suppression of the Croatian Spring, the series was shown for the first time by Television Zagreb only in 1984.

<sup>45</sup> Kadijević, who was charged with war crimes in Croatia, went into exile to Russia in 2001 where he was granted citizenship and passed away in 2014.

<sup>46</sup> Matijanić, Vladimir. 2005. *Tajna nestalog oružja*. *Feral Tribune*, 7 April 2005.

Figure 19: Monument to Matan, Imotski



Source: photo by Ulf Brunnbauer

*Prosjaci i sinovi* was directed by Antun Vrdoljak, who was born in Imotski in 1931 and was one of the first vice-presidents of the Republic of Croatia. He was a close associate of president Franjo Tuđman who made Vrdoljak head of Croatian Radio-Television (HRT) as well as president of the Croatian Olympic Committee. In the 1990s and early 2000s, a whole row of influential people originally from Imotski came to prominence in Zagreb, such as Žarko Domljan (the first speaker of parliament in independent Croatia), Ivan Milas (a member of parliament for the conservative HDZ party), and Vlado Gotovac (a liberal member of parliament). However, what did Imotska krajina gain from such “respectable” figures? According to *Slobodna Dalmacija*, “absolutely nothing”.<sup>47</sup> Nothing came about on a par with Kadijević’s feat of establishing a big factory in his native town.

The monument to Matan was unveiled in 2010 by Ante Todorić, father of the entrepreneur Ivica Todorić, another powerful businessman from Imotski based in Zagreb. Todorić was the former CEO of the *Agrokor* conglomerate, which also owned the *Konzum* supermarket chain (*Agrokor*, which had expanded quickly and accumulated enormous debts, was controversially rescued by the government through de-facto nationalization in 2017). The Todorić family has been accompanied by various scandals over the years, mostly related to privatization and corruption, but the fact that Ante Todorić unveiled the monument is not surprising since it stands in front of a *Konzum* supermarket and Todorić himself comes from a village near Imotski. He represents another eminent family from Imotska krajina whose success depended on leaving, but later brought investment. While the film character Matan was a resourceful and successful trickster, he was to a lesser extent corrupt. He left a big mark on local consciousness and is even depicted in a mural at the bus station, next to the Wailing Wall. He stands for the resilience and ingenuity of the people of Imotska krajina. A non-descript shopping mall and a dilapidated bus station can be rich in different layers and interwoven threads of history and memory.

<sup>47</sup> Čosić, Braco, Ma, koji Imotski loby: Šaka rogova u vreći. *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 12 January 2000, 18.

Figure 20: Mural dedicated to Matan at the Imotski bus station



Source: photo by Ulf Brunnbauer

### Reflections

Imotski is still a place that people leave for *pečalba* (work abroad), and people there still love Mercedes cars, so much so that they decided to erect a monument to them. However, in the past migrants would return in a Mercedes, and some even invested their savings in local industries. Today, no one expects them to return. There is no investment in industry because industry has disappeared. Although some people are nostalgic about industrial labor, the majority seems aware that any new economic future will be built on tourism. Those who remained in the town hoped that the Mercedes monument would help, among other things, to increase Imotski's appeal as a new tourist destination. This car brand, the only one to command their deep respect, was to represent a guarantee of future success. We had hoped to witness that miracle. Unfortunately, four years after the announcement of its construction, the monument had not yet been erected. August 1, 2023, went by and no Mercedes cut in limestone was unveiled. The Covid pandemic had slowed down the work, but so had questions about the ownership of the land where the monument was to be erected. Nothing atypical for this area, however; another emptiness remained, somehow camouflaged by a parking lot.

Figure 21: Pedestal of the future monument to the Mercedes car, Imotski



Source: photo by Ulf Brunnbauer

“A social ghost or afterlife is, in an anthropological perspective, not a question of souls continuing to linger, but of material or social structures that somehow remain stuck even though they are in principle gone,” explains Martin Demant Frederiksen in his reflections on emptiness in post-Soviet Georgia.<sup>48</sup> Migration creates its own social ghosts and afterlives. We should add these to the concept of the “culture of migration” coined by migration scholar

<sup>48</sup> Demant Frederiksen, Martin. *Emptiness, ghost towns and social afterlives* (accessed 23.10.2023).

Dougless Massey and his colleagues: “*Migration becomes deeply ingrained into the repertoire of people’s behaviors, and values associated with migration become part of the community’s values.*”<sup>49</sup> Anthropologist Caroline Brettell added the importance of the symbolic dimension for cultures of migration, as any cultural formation is rooted in symbols and representations, and thereby produces meanings.<sup>50</sup>

Monuments to gastarbeiters, the shopfloors of abandoned or still operational *devizne fabrike*, oversized homes built for future use, and visiting migrants in their cars with foreign registration plates fill the places they have left with memories and stories. These memories form a crucial part of the culture of migration in the places we visited. Memories are another form of social remittance, linking “here” and “there”. They also testify to the failed promises of the successive political regimes that pledged to develop this region. Such memories of what might have been possible if history had not gone so wrong can only contribute to the sentiment of loss, decline, and lack of prospects so widespread in this region, as well as in other places in southeastern Europe. This is one of the reasons why cultures of migration perpetuate migration.

### Acknowledgements

Research for this article was financed by a grant from the Leibniz Association for the project “Transnational Families, Farms and Firms” (the authors are part of the project team). We also thank the seeffeld (Strengthening Southeast European Studies) project at the University of Regensburg and the “Transforming Anxieties of Aging” project at IOS Regensburg, both funded by the Volkswagen Foundation, for their support. We are grateful to Sabine Rutar and the two anonymous reviewers for their feedback on earlier versions of the article.

### Notes on authors

**Sara Žerić** has been a doctoral researcher at IOS Regensburg since 2021 working on her doctoral thesis “*Gastarbeiters as agents of development in Socialist Yugoslavia*”. She has an M.A. in History from the University of Pula, Croatia. In July 2022, Sara Žerić joined the research project “Transnational Families, Farms and Firms: Migrant Entrepreneurs in Kosovo and Serbia Since the 1960s” at IOS Regensburg as a researcher. She is interested in the social history of socialist Yugoslavia, especially in the process of migration, modernization, and women’s history.

**Ulf Brunnbauer** is Academic Director of the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies (IOS) in Regensburg, Germany. He has a PhD in history from the University of Graz (1999) and a Habilitation from the Free University of Berlin (2006). In 2008 he was appointed Professor of the History of Southeast and East Europe at the University of Regensburg. His last book is the co-authored monograph *In den Stürmen der Transformation. Zwei Werften zwischen Sozialismus und EU* (Suhrkamp, 2022; an English translation is forthcoming with University of Toronto Press). Ulf Brunnbauer explores the social history of Southeastern Europe since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with a focus on labor and migration.

### References

- Allen, Casey D. 2011. On actor-network theory and landscape. *Area* 43(3), 274-280.  
 Anić, Josip. 1989. Tradicija migracija u Imotskoj krajini. *Migracijske teme* 5(4), 269–86.  
 Baučić, Ivo. Neke specifičnosti Imotskih migracija. *Imotska krajina*, 1 April 1980, 5.

<sup>49</sup> Massey, Dougless; Arango, Joaquin; Hugo, Graeme; Kouaouci, Ali; Pellegrino, Adela and J. Edward Taylor. 1993. Theories of international migration: A review and appraisal. *Population and Development Review* 19(3), 431-466, 452–453.

<sup>50</sup> Brettell, Caroline. 2003. *Anthropology and migration: Essays on transnationalism, ethnicity and identity*. Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press, 3–4.



- Bekavac Šuvar, Vedrana. *Tvornice su zapošljavale 9000 ljudi, danas ostali goli zidovi* (accessed 14 August 2017).
- Bernard, Sara. 2019. *Deutsch Marks in the head, shovel in the hands and Yugoslavia in the Heart: The Gastarbeiter return to Yugoslavia (1965–1991)*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.
- Block, Fred. 2008. *Polanyi's double movement and the reconstruction of critical theory*. *Revue Interventions économiques* 38, 1-17.
- Bonfiglioli, Chiara. 2019. *Women and industry in the Balkans: The rise and fall of the Yugoslav textile sector*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Brunnbauer, Ulf. 2016. *Globalizing Southeastern Europe. America, emigrants and the state since the late 19th Century*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington.
- Böhme, Gernot. 1995. *Atmosphäre. Essays zur neuen Ästhetik*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.
- Brettell, Caroline. 2003. *Anthropology and migration: Essays on transnationalism, ethnicity and identity*. Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press.
- Brücker, Herbet / Falkenhain, Mariella / Fendel, Tanja / Promberger, Markus / Raab, Miriam / Trübswetter, Parvati / Blažević, Lana and Mirjeta Trmkoli. 2020. *Evaluierung der Westbalkanregelung: Registerdatenanalyse und Betriebsfallstudien*. Nürnberg: IAB.
- Ćosisić, Braco, Ma, koji Imotski loby: Šaka rogova u vreći. *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 12 January 2000, 18.
- De Haas, Hein. 2012. The migration and development pendulum: A critical view on research and policy. *International Migration* 50(3), 8-25.
- Demant Frederiksen, Martin. *Emptiness, ghost towns and social afterlives* (accessed 23.10.2023).
- Državni zavod za statistiku. 2011. *Popis stanovništva 2011* (accessed: 27 March 2024).
- . 2013. *Gradovi u statistici* (accessed: 27 March 2024).
- . 2021. *Popis stanovništva 2021* (accessed: 27 March 2024).
- . 2024. *Employment and Wages – Review by Counties* (accessed: 27 March 2024).
- Dudley, Bernard Schaffer and Marija-Liisa Kiljunen (eds.). 1979. *Underdeveloped Europe: Studies in core-periphery Relations*. Hassocks: The Harvester Press Limited.
- Federalni zavod za statistiku. 2022. *Kanton 10 u brojkama* (accessed: 27 March 2024).
- Gelo, Jakov. 1998. *Narodnosni i vjerski sastav stanovništva Hrvatske, 1880-1991: Po naseljima*. Zagreb: Državni zavod za statistiku Republike Hrvatske.
- Gudelj, Ivan. Otvorena tvornica koju su podignuli seljaci, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 23 December 1970, 5.
- Gunko, Maria. 2023. *'Nothingness', migrants and de-bordering: effects of post-Soviet conflicts on a small Armenian town*, (accessed: 27 March 2024).
- Hornstein Tomić, Caroline / Pichler, Robert and Sarah Scholl-Schneider (eds.). 2018. *Remigration to post-socialist Europe. Hopes and realities of return*. Vienna: LIT.
- Ivanović, Vladimir. 2012. *Geburtstag pišeš normalno. Jugoslovenski gastarbajteri u Austriji I SR Nemačkoj*. Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju.
- Interview with Alojze (retired migrant worker). Aržano, 1 August 2023.
- Interview with Ante (retired migrant worker). Tomislavgrad, 2 August 2023.
- Interview with group of men. Posušje, 2 August 2023.
- Interview with Ilija Papić (head of municipal council). Tomislavgrad, 2 August 2023.
- Interview with Ivan Budalić (mayor of Imotski). Imotski, 4 August 2023.
- Interview with Ivan Topić (president of Imotski Oldtimer Club). Imotski, 5 August 2023.
- Interview with Ivo Baučić (retired migration scholar). Omiš, 10 September 2009.
- Interview with Ivo (retired manager). Imotski, 3 August 2023.
- Interview with Kata (retired worker). Aržano, 1 August 2023.
- Interview with Mirko (retired manager). Aržano, 1 August 2023.
- Interview with Mladen Vedriš (economist and former politician). Online, 11 May 2023.
- Interview with Stipe Ladić (historian). Aržano, 1 August 2023.

- Kamberović, Husnija. 2011. *Mostarsko savjetovanje 1966. godine*, in *Hod po trnju. Iz bosanskohercegovačke historije 20. Stoljeća*, edited by Kamberović, Husnija. Sarajevo: Institut za istoriju u Sarajevu, 130-179.
- King, Russell and Julie Vullnetari. 2009. Remittances, return, diaspora: Framing the debate in the Context of Albania and Kosova. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 9(4), 385–406.
- King, Russell / Piracha, Matloob and Julie Vullnetari. 2010. Migration and development in transition economies of Southeastern Europe: Albania and Kosovo. *Eastern European Economics* 48(6), 3-16.
- Kukoč, Juraj. 2010. Opreke u dokumentarnim filmovima Krste Papića. *Hrvatski filmski letopis* 16(61), 84–91.
- Locations. *Emptiness* (accessed 23.10.2023).
- Lovrenović, Ivan. 2022. *O skulpturi Ramski gastarbeiter Petra Dolića* (accessed: 27 March 2024).
- Massey, Dougless; Arango, Joaquin; Hugo, Graeme; Kouaouci, Ali; Pellegrino, Adela and J. Edward Taylor. 1993. Theories of international migration: A review and appraisal. *Population and Development Review* 19(3), 431-466.
- Matijanić, Vladimir. 2005. *Tajna nestalog oružja*. *Feral Tribune*, 7 April 2005.
- Portes, Alejandro. 2007. Migration, development, and segmented assimilation: A conceptual review of the evidence. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 610(1), 73-97.
- Savezni zavod za statistiku. 1971. *Lica na privremenom radu u inostranstvu prema popisu stanovništva i stanova 1971*. Belgrade.
- Saxer, Martin and Ruben Andersson. 2019. The return of remoteness: insecurity, isolation and connectivity in the new world disorder. *Social Anthropology* 27, 140-155.
- Stierli, Martino and Vladimir Kulić (eds.). 2018. *Toward a concrete utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art.
- Škilić, Marko. 2019. *Nekada simbol uspjeha, a danas mu Imočani dižu spomenik* (accessed: 23 October 2023).
- Slobodna Dalmacija. 1979. Jesu li investicije u Imotskom zaista promašene. *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 10 October 1979.
- Slobodna Dalmacija. 1976. Osobni dohoci: Krediti tvornice, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 16 April 1976, 4.
- Vedriš, Mladen. 1978. *Od deviznih ušteta do radnih mjesta u domovini*. Zagreb: Center za istraživanje migracija. *Rasprave o migracijama* 49.
- Winterhagen, Jenni. 2011. *Die Pioniere von Imotski. Die Verwendung von Remittances am Beispiel des ehemaligen Jugoslawien*, in *Gesellschaften in Bewegung. Emigration aus und Immigration nach Südosteuropa in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*, edited by Brunnbauer, Ulf / Novinščak, Karolina and Christian Voss. Munich: Oldenbourg, 61-92.
- ZDF. 1974. *Die Leute von Aržano* (accessed: 27 March 2024).