Between Blocs: Socialist Yugoslavia as a Pragmatic Player in the International Refugee Regime

Navigating the international refugee regime: the case of socialist Yugoslavia[1][2]

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Abstract: This article analyses the nexus between Yugoslavia's refugee policies and its peculiar geopolitical position. First, it investigates the post-1948 Yugoslavia's shift from a haven for like-minded refugees to precarious sanctuary for refugees from the Soviet bloc. Second, it explores the twofold role that Yugoslavia played as a transit country for escapees and a producer of asylum seekers. It then explores the tightening of the relations between Yugoslavia and the UNHCR, which resulted in the opening of a UNHCR branch office in Belgrade in the late 1970s. Finally, it offers insight into Yugoslavia's attitude towards non-European refugees.

In December 1985, during the visit he paid to Yugoslavia, the Danish United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Poul Hartling met the Yugoslav Federal Secretary for Foreign Affairs Raif Dizdarević. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the status of the UNHCR branch office in Yugoslavia. Opened in 1976, the Yugoslav branch office was granted honorary status meaning it enjoyed a significant degree of autonomy including the right to appoint a honorary representative of its choice. Hartling advocated for turning the Yugoslav office into an ordinary UNHCR representation, which would have ensured direct control from the organization's headquarters in Geneva. In proposing this change of status, the UNHCR was praising Yugoslavia not only for acting as a transit country for Soviet bloc refugees but also for successfully resolving the issue of Yugoslav defections. Interestingly, Dizdarević referred to these same successes of Yugoslavia to argue in favour of Yugoslavia retaining exceptional status. As Dizdarević put it, 'we [Yugoslavia] have to ensure that our neighbours do not get the feeling that we have opened an office in cooperation with the UNHCR for the escape of their citizens westward'.[3]

The meeting between the two diplomats sheds some light on the peculiar position of Yugoslavia against the backdrop of the flows of Cold War refugees. On the one hand, it acted as a transit country for refugees from the Soviet

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[3] Diplomatski Arhiv Ministarstva Spoljnih Poslova Republike Srbije (hereafter DAMSP), PA (Politička Arhiva), OUN, 1985, fasc. 146, d. 1, 4202, 3.

bloc, thus gaining international prestige by being 'on the right side' of the Western-led refugee regime. On the other, it managed to downplay the issue of Yugoslav political emigration abroad by legalizing labour migration, a move that became one of the trademarks of the Yugoslav political project. Once cooperation gained traction, the UNHCR quietly advocated for mitigating the special status of the Yugoslav office. Conversely, the Yugoslav delegates stood firm on retaining that status. During the 1985 meeting, Hartling did not press too strongly. Yugoslavia's geopolitical position made the UNHCR willing to cooperate. From the mid-1950s, when Yugoslavia attained its position as an alternative from both blocs and started building alliances with countries from the Global South, it potentially became a strategic partner for this international agency, which sought more autonomy from the Western bloc and wished to expand its mandate beyond Europe.

Yugoslavia advanced claims of exceptionality on many fronts. Following the 1948 split with the Soviet Union, the country embarked upon an original path to socialism. Domestically, this resulted in the implementation of a system of self-management, which decentralized decision-making on economic matters and gradually empowered republican centres while allowing market elements and a more liberal attitude in cultural and social matters. This coexisted with the one-party socialist system. Internationally, Yugoslavia positioned itself as an alternative to both Cold War blocs, at the forefront of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). This meant that the country aligned itself with different international actors according to circumstances, and carved a niche for itself by drawing on its multifaceted foreign policies. Although a thorough reflection on the theoretical foundation of interconnected concepts such as 'hybridity', 'exceptionalism', and 'in-betweenness' is surprisingly yet to come, several studies have explored how the specific blend of concepts from both blocs, as well as from the Global South operated within the Yugoslav system. This was mirrored on specific spheres. From pop music to geopolitical strategies, Yugoslavia acted as a space where trends, patterns, and ideas from the West, the East and the Global South met, struggled, and sometimes merged (Jović 2009; Jakovina 2011, Jelača et al. 2017; Unkovski-Korica 2016). Yugoslavia stood apart in almost every forum for its stubborn commitment to presenting itself as an actor able to mediate between geopolitical models and allegiances, and refugee policies were no exception.

As this article will argue, Yugoslavia's peculiar geopolitical position within the international refugee regime mediated between preoccupations and ideological stances that marked the First and Second World, and the countries of the Non-Aligned Movement. Being aware of the extreme politicization of refugee policies during the Cold War, Yugoslavia crafted for itself a mediatory position, which at the same time made it possible for the country to be regarded as a reliable partner for Western countries while actively countering the unsettling consequences of defections. This

intertwined with Yugoslavia's stance of championing a universalist understanding of rights, as advocated by countries and movements in the decolonizing world.

Scholarship has extensively and critically explored the refugee regime that came into existence after World War II. The Cold War shaped refugee policies in the Western bloc, with the figure of asylum seekers overlapping with that of defectors from socialist countries. This was clearly a means of delegitimizing the socialist model, represented by its citizens taking risks in order to reach the Western bloc (Carruthers 2009; Scott 2023). Eastern European refugees became living evidence of the superiority of the 'free world' over the Eastern bloc (Salomon 1991; Loescher 2001; Gatrell 2013). This dichotomic view was epitomized by the use of the term 'captive nations' in the early Cold War years, implying that Eastern Europeans were imprisoned in the Soviet bloc (Loescher, Scanlan 1986; Carruthers 2005). While this narrative originated in the United States of America (USA), it nonetheless informed the refugee policies in the countries on the borders of the capitalist bloc (Salvatici 2014; Poutrus 2014; Graf & Knoll 2017; Molnar 2019; Stokes 2019; Comte 2020; Ballinger 2020; Graf 2022). Conversely, asylum in state socialism has only recently begun to be unpacked by historians (Olšáková 2007; Vojtěchćovský 2012; Vukman 2017; Tohma & Reinke 2024). Based on discretionary practices, it drew on the idea of providing protection to individuals persecuted for their antifascist credentials and their commitment to progressive causes. In this way, they represented an implicit response to the Western claim on moral superiority (Tohma forthcoming). Refugee policies that emerged in the Western and Eastern blocs developed in mutual opposition. Yet, they shared the idea of awarding protection to like-minded individuals fitting into their ideological framework. Quite often, political organization by refugees openly challenged the political system of their countries of origin and cultivated hopes for a potential regime change. In both systems, ideologically-driven solidarity was mitigated by pragmatic preoccupations that weighed the welcome to be offered to refugees against their employability and acceptability as a social group. Refugee policies in non-aligned Yugoslavia shared some of the main features that characterized both blocs, but they were also informed by the country's increasing contacts with the Global South. The relevance of this case study therefore goes beyond studies on the post-Yugoslav area. In fact, by looking at a specific national context, this article will elaborate on claims and discourse about refugees developed in different geopolitical world areas during the Cold War.

The article will analyse the different phases in Yugoslav refugee policies, in conjunction with wider developments. In the first part, the article analyses the first post-war decade, when Yugoslavia moved from promoting itself as a haven for like-minded refugees to becoming a precarious refuge for escapees from the neighbouring countries of the Soviet bloc. In the second part, the paper moves on to a discussion of the twofold role that Yugoslavia played in 1957-1958, when it happened to be simultaneously a transit country for Hungarian refugees and a country of origin for

asylum seekers on a large scale. Yet, defections increased rather than ceased in the 1950s, despite the stabilization of the country and initial economic growth. Until the late 1960s, thousands of Yugoslavs sought asylum in Western Europe. The third part shows how Yugoslavia attempted to benefit from the strengthening of its relationship with the UNHCR to downplay the thorny issue of Yugoslav asylum seekers abroad and detach itself from the other socialist countries while avoiding an abrupt rupture. The fourth part examines how the opening of a UNHCR office in Belgrade in 1976 sanctioned Yugoslavia's formal integration into the international refugee regime as a transit country for refugees from the Soviet bloc. The final part explores the differential treatment between refugees from Eastern Europe and those from the Global South, which remained a constant throughout the different stages in the development of Yugoslav refugee policy. Despite Yugoslavia's strongly held position on a universalist understanding of refugee rights in international fora, refugees from the Soviet bloc were welcomed within the framework of the international refugee regime, while those from the Global South had to rely on other channels. The conclusion pulls these different threads together.

This article draws on fresh sources originating primarily from both Yugoslav archives – namely, the collections of the Yugoslav Federal Secretariat of Foreign Affairs – and international organizations – the UNHCR. The combination of these two groups of sources shows the dynamic interplay between international and national actors in shaping refugee policies, which were primarily framed as a foreign policy issue. The archives of the Federal Secretariat for Internal Affairs, which was responsible for the management of refugees while in Yugoslavia, have not been made available to historians yet. The article draws on sources from other archives, such as the collections of the Federal Executive Committee and the Red Cross of Yugoslavia, located in the Archives of Yugoslavia, the CIA archives, and Yugoslav press sources to circumvent existing gaps in specific topics and analyse the Yugoslav narrative on refugees. Additionally, it draws on a few testimonies of former refugees collected after their defection by the Italian authorities and Radio Free Europe, and located, respectively, in Italian archives and the Open Society Archivum in Budapest.

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The 1948 political earthquake. The shift from progressive refugees to Soviet bloc escapees

In the aftermath of World War II, the Yugoslav migration regime was the same as that in other socialist countries. Against the background of a ban on outmigration, defections of Yugoslavs 'Westwards' were framed through the lens of the East-West confrontation. Until 1948, Yugoslavia's position overlapped with that of the Soviet Bloc in rejecting the policy of resettlement introduced by the International Refugee Organization (IRO). This international agency, which existed between 1947 and 1951, focused on the resettlement of defectors from newly established socialist countries. In the Yugoslav narrative, displaced persons in European camps were identified as former collaborators, while the instrumentalization of refugees by Western countries was regarded as depriving refugee management of its humanitarian

commitment. While denying the need of a mechanism for international management of refugees, the Yugoslav Foreign Minister Aleš Bebler stated that, despite having been a refugee twice in his life, he had never relied on international assistance (Janco 2014, pp. 436-37).

At the same time, socialist Yugoslavia opened its doors to left-leaning refugees fitting into its ideological framework (Jovanović 1985, pp. 98-10; Gramith 2019; Miletto 2019). However, what deeply marked the early post-war years – and resulted in scholarly attention – was the hospitality offered to Greek refugees. Yugoslavia both hosted thousands of these refugees and acted as a transit country for those heading towards the Soviet Bloc (Mitrović 1997; Ristović 2000; Katsanos 2015; Ristović 2016). While Yugoslavia initially cooperated with other socialist countries in this endeavour, the 1948 split with the Soviet Union turned the issue of Greek refugees into a bone of contention between Yugoslavia and the Eastern Bloc.

The 1948 Yugoslav split with the Cominform and consequent rapprochement with the Western bloc prompted a new phase that would make Yugoslavia willing to embark on cooperation with the international refugee regime (Jovanović 1985, p. 107). A Yugoslav delegation took part in the conference organized by the United Nations to set up the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, advocating some principles that would become the pillars of its later refugee policy: the desire to challenge the Cold War division and support for decolonization; a rhetorical insistence on social over individual rights and a securitized approach towards refugees in the country.[4] Furthermore, Yugoslavia successfully argued in favour of inserting the 'non-political and humanitarian clause' into the UNHCR Statute. As articulated by Yugoslavia, this was meant to mitigate tensions between the East and the West, and to downplay the 'hostile activities' of refugee groups against their countries of origin in the host states (Kyoichi 1998, pp. 40-1). The fact that the UNHCR was initially opposed not only by the Soviet Union but also by the United States, which prioritized other organizations under their direct control such as the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (Loescher 2001, pp. 53-7; Venturas 2015), encouraged Yugoslavia to pursue cooperation.

The dramatic geopolitical changes in 1948-1949 made Yugoslavia more willing to strengthen cooperation with the Western bloc. This also changed Yugoslavia's position in the map of refugee flows. On the one hand, the population drain triggered by the establishment of the communist regime, which had involved a significant number of political opponents (including former collaborators), had come to an end. On the other hand, from the early 1950s, allegedly pro-

[4] DASMP, PA, UN, 1951, fasc. 102, d. 8, 410814, Izveštaj delegacije FNRJ na konferenciji za izradu konvencije o izbeglicama.

Yugoslav individuals from the neighbouring people's democracies poured into Yugoslavia. According to the data provided by Yugoslav sources, in August 1951 there were around 5,000 Eastern European refugees in the country. These individuals were primarily Albanians (2,500), Bulgarians (800), Hungarians (700), and Romanians (500).[5] Despite the liberalization drive that would gradually sweep Yugoslavia from the early 1950s, hard-line administrative methods and tight police control were the norm in refugee management. Furthermore, against the backdrop of a somewhat gloomy situation, with the constant threat of Soviet intervention, Yugoslav intelligence cultivated plans to use Eastern European refugees to destabilize their countries of origin.[6] Refugees were mostly resettled in the borderlands where kin-minorities resided, and these acted as hubs for intelligence operations into neighbouring countries. The Yugoslav authorities displayed a fluctuating attitude towards them: from time to time refugees from the Soviet Bloc were allowed to reach Trieste and consequently the Western bloc. In other cases, they were compelled to remain in Yugoslavia. Testimonies released by former inmates once they reached Italian territory described miserable conditions in the closed facilities they were placed in, which were repeatedly compared to those of a Nazi concentration camp.[7]

The Yugoslav narrative appropriated the arguments deployed in the Western bloc to delegitimize its Eastern counterpart by stressing the unbearable conditions in neighbouring countries, and their oppressive nature as triggering escapes from the Eastern bloc.[8] Such a position not only emerged in the Yugoslav press, which regularly reported on Eastern European nationals finding refuge in Yugoslavia.[9] It also became one of the arguments that Yugoslavia championed in international bodies. In a speech delivered in early 1953 at the UNHCR, the Yugoslav diplomat Franc Kos described Eastern European refugees in Yugoslavia as individuals who 'risk their lives to come to a country where they do not have to take orders, not only for what they have to do but even for what they have to think'.[10] In that particular case, the political agendas of both the Western Bloc and Yugoslavia coincided in their desire to use refugees to delegitimize the countries of the Soviet Bloc, a move in stark opposition to the stance that Yugoslavia had championed, namely the need to counter Cold War instrumentalization . The dire treatment experienced by Eastern European refugees did not prevent Yugoslavia from depicting actions to welcome them as a humanitarian endeavour. Yugoslavia's

[5] DASMP, PA, UN, 1951, fasc. 102, d. 8, 410814, Zabeleška o sastanku sa g. D. Vickersom, predstavnikom Visokog komesara UN za izbeglice, August 20, 1951. The refugee figure was estimated at 8,000 by Vernant (1953, p. 288).
[6] Archivio della Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (hereafter APCM), Ufficio Zone di Confine (UZC), Sezione II, FVG Trieste, b. 58 vol. I, fasc. T 328.5.4 Profughi stranieri clandestini (dalla Jugoslavia), f. 434/1-2.
[7] Open Society Archives (hereafter OSA), Romanian Unit, Subject Files (300-60-1), box 197, Exile – Organizations abroad 1953-1955; APCM, UZC, Sezione II, FVG Trieste, b. 55, vol. II, Giornale "Libera e indipendente Bulgaria", October 11, 1955.
[8] "450 omladinaca prebeglo u Zapadni Berlin", *Politika*, August 11, 1951, 1.
[9] "Za poslednja tri dana prebegla su 63 bugarska građanina u našu zemlju" *Politika*, March 29, 1951, 2; "Četiri madjarska graničara prebegla u Jugoslaviju", *Politika*, August 16, 1951, 2.
[10] DAMSP, PA, UN, 1953, fasc. 112, d. 4, 41402.

constructive position on international cooperation was, however, still tempered by opposition to any form of external interference in its internal affairs. Visits by a UNHCR delegation were repeatedly postponed. When this delegation was finally authorized to visit the country, a selected agenda of meetings was crafted in order to present the efforts undertaken by Yugoslavia to integrate refugees, while concealing aspects relating to containment and coercion.[11] While refugee management continued to be influenced by securitization and discretionary practices, Yugoslavia began to depict itself as playing by the rules of the Western-led international refugee regime.

The 1957 conundrum: a transit country generating refugees

After relationships with the Soviet Bloc were normalized in the mid-1950s, refugees from Eastern European countries became an inconvenient presence for Yugoslavia, which tried to get rid of them as soon as possible by promoting their emigration westward. This happened either through resettlement schemes sponsored by international organizations or by encouraging refugees to cross the border into Italy. There were also attempts to force the refugees to repatriate.[12] In the years after 1949, most of the Greek refugees also left the country. Yugoslavia's geopolitical position allowed them to choose either the West or the East for their resettlement (Mitrović 1996, p. 197)[13]. Apart from individual cases, the bulk of refugees from the Soviet Bloc left Yugoslavia in the late 1950s, with the only exception being a contingent of Albanians.[14] When the issue of post-1948 Eastern European refugees seemed to be drawing to a close, Yugoslavia was involved in the most spectacular endeavour in refugee resettlement occurring during the Cold War.

Throughout the 1950s, small contingents of refugees from the neighbouring countries had reached the Western bloc via Yugoslavia. Nonetheless, it was the influx of Hungarians escaping the Soviet invasion that turned Yugoslavia into a transit country on a large scale. The Yugoslav precedent of an autonomous road to socialism was paramount in the events that led to the Hungarian revolution in October 1956, as was Tito's popularity across the Soviet Bloc. Yugoslavia however, ultimately backed the Soviet decision to end Nagy's experiment in November 1956 when the Hungarian revolt seemed to challenge the Cold War balance in which Yugoslavia stood out because of its independence. Yet, Belgrade attempted to use its hybrid position to find a compromise solution. While discussing the possibility that some Communist hardliners threatened by 'reactionary forces' had found refuge in Yugoslavia, the Yugoslav embassy offered asylum to

[11] DAMSP, PA, UN, DAMSP, PA, UN, 1953, fasc. 112, d. 6, 410392.
[12] International Committee of the Red Cross Archives, B AG 234 227-001, Réfugiés en Yougoslavie; APCM, UZC, sez. II, FVG Trieste, b. 58 vol. II, fasc. T 328/5/5 Profughi albanesi a Trieste.
[13] APCM, UZC, sez. II, FVG Trieste, b. 55 vol. II, fasc. T 328/5 Profughi greci a Trieste
[14] UNHCR Archives, F 13 S 1 2 CI, box 13, Mission en Yougoslavie 1966, Banja Koviljača migration center in Yugoslavia.

Nagy. When the Soviets finally abducted the Hungarian Prime Minister despite guarantees given for his safe return home, a new confrontation between Belgrade and Moscow erupted, growing more intense in the following months (Stykalin 2005; Rajak 2011). What the Hungarian events made clear was that Yugoslavia would not join the Soviet Bloc after the normalization of its relationship with the Soviet Union.

Hungarian escapees were allowed into Yugoslavia following this new deterioration in Soviet-Yugoslav relations. Although it initially turned back refugees and continued to apply the repatriation mantra, Yugoslavia ultimately opened its border from January to August 1957. The scale of the influx – 19,587 individuals crossed the Yugoslav-Hungarian border predominantly in the abovementioned time frame – compelled Yugoslavia to seek international financial support (Kovačević 2003; Ajlec 2018). Previously established relations with the UNHCR proved crucial in starting a cooperative process that made evacuation to and resettlement in Western countries possible. This was facilitated by the creation of a temporary office of the UNHCR in Belgrade in March 1957 (Kovačević 2003, p. 101). The outflow of Hungarian refugees through Yugoslavia made the headlines in newspapers worldwide. International press reported from the country, criticizing the coercive methods often used on refugees, but also praising the efforts made by Yugoslavia in this situation. International pressure contributed to improving conditions for the refugees. For instance, it led to the partial renovation of the Gerovo camp, located in the isolated region of Gorski Kotar (Croatia), with the symbolic removal of the barbed wire fence.[15] Additionally, some refugees were accommodated in hotels, as happened in the tourist resorts of Opatija, Lovran and Crikvenica, in the area around Rijeka.[16] The pragmatic attitude of the Yugoslav leadership went so far as to initiate cooperation with the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM). As the most Western-oriented among international agencies, the ICEM could count on extensive resettlement capacities (Parsanoglou & Papadopoulos 2019; Venturas 2015).

The Yugoslav press presented the country's humanitarian commitment as a moral obligation that nonetheless testified to its willingness to neutralize the Cold War political instrumentalizations. In apparently neutral tones, press articles mentioned that refugees were free to decide whether to be resettled or repatriated.[17] While resettlement symbolized one of the pillars of the Western refugee policy, repatriation was the mechanism most often advocated by the Soviet Bloc as the most effective means of resolving the post-war refugee crisis. However, negotiations with the UNHCR over the repatriation of minors to Hungary contributed to mitigating the politicization of this issue and allowed some space for

[15] APCM, UZC, Sezione II, FVG, Trieste, b. 58 vol. I, f. 420.
[16] "Jučer u Rijeci", *Novi List*, April 5, 1957, 2.
[17] "Jugoslavija ispunjava sve obaveze prema madjarskim izbeglicama", *Politika*, July 25, 1957, 1.

cooperation with socialist countries (Loescher 2001, pp. 85, 87–9).[18] To tackle the issue of Hungarian minors within its territory, Yugoslavia actively engaged in mediating between the International Committee of the Red Cross and its Hungarian branch (Mallaeva 2020). By and large, Yugoslavia used the role of transit country that it was reluctantly called upon to play as a means of enhancing its image of difference with respect to the Soviet bloc.

The role of transit country for Hungarian refugees came at a time when Yugoslavia was striving to cope with another phenomenon that represented a thorn in the side of all the other socialist leaderships. The year 1957 witnessed a sharp increase in the number of Yugoslavs seeking asylum in neighbouring Western countries, which did not go unnoticed internationally. In the second half of the 1950s, thousands of its citizens sought asylum in Western Europe each year. The UNHCR played a dual role, addressing both the question of Yugoslav refugees abroad and that of foreign refugees in Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia's peculiar position determined not only the trajectories of those foreign refugees in Yugoslavia, but also the conditions of Yugoslav asylum seekers in Western countries. As a consequence of the 1948 geopolitical shift, they began to be differentiated from those from the Soviet Bloc. For instance, Yugoslavia rarely featured in the list of countries of origin of escapees included in the United States Escapee Program, the staunchest anti-communist initiative in support of refugees (Carruthers 2005, p. 924). The Western attitude towards Yugoslavia acknowledged both the liberalization drive that unfolded from the early 1950s and the fact that Western countries were less willing to discredit Yugoslavia. Similarly, from the early 1960s it was Yugoslavia's open-door policy with Western countries that made flight to Italy and Austria possible.

Yet, Yugoslavia's attempts to differentiate itself from the Soviet Bloc did not go unchallenged. The 1959 report published by the Zellerbach Commission on the European refugee situation[19] advocated for Yugoslavs to be regarded as political rather than economic refugees.[20] Furthermore, when pointing to the young age of most escapees, the Zellerbach report stated that 'it is impossible not to see the political parallel between these non-violent but nonetheless dramatic revolts of Yugoslav youth and the revolt of the youth in East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and even the Soviet Union'.[21] In 1959, the launch of World Refugee Year triggered renewed attention to the plight of refugees worldwide, encouraging several anti-communist organizations to spread information about the dire situation of 'captive nations' in Eastern Europe

[18] The years 1956-1957 marked an attempt by the UNHCR to achieve some autonomy from the Western bloc, which included the possibility of mediating between the blocs (Elie 2007, p. 6).
[19] The Zellerbach Commission was set up at the initiative of the International Rescue Committee, a private organization that acted in close cooperation with the US Government.
[20] DAMSP, PA, UN, 1959, fasc. 149, d. 6, 410896.
[21] CIA Archives, General CIA Records, CIA-RDP86B00269R000900040001-7, 83, 93-95, available at: https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP86B00269R000900040001-7.pdf, accessed April 29, 2025.

(Gatrell 2011). In the same year, a conservative campaign in the USA argued that Yugoslavia should be equated as a producer of refugees in a way that was not dissimilar to other Eastern European states.[22] A possible equating of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Bloc was regarded as particularly harmful because Yugoslavia's aim was to use its affiliation with the international refugee agency to emphasize its uniqueness compared to other socialist countries. Nonetheless, Yugoslavs continued to be regarded as a specific group, and Yugoslavia was not widely referred to as a producer of refugees in mainstream public discourse.[23] Although they were still entitled to apply for asylum in Western Europe, those whose applications were turned down could be repatriated, which was not the case with other socialist countries (Rolandi 2018).

Reverberations of state-building: the shaping of Yugoslav migration and refugee policies

From the second half of the 1950s, the peculiarity of the political project applied in Yugoslavia, a socialist country independent from both blocs and merging some features of the two, emerged on a dramatic scale internationally. This trend culminated in the 1965 economic reforms, which boosted market elements in the Yugoslav economy, resulting in increased class differences and rising unemployment. Several studies have focused on the economic pressures that led the Yugoslav leadership to legalize labor migration – providing a safety valve to unemployment and attracting foreign currency through remittances (Zimmermann 1987; Schierup 1990; Brunnbauer 2009). The documents on the relationships between Yugoslavia and the UNHCR bring an international dimension to the picture. In 1959, Yugoslav diplomats discussed the possibility of channelling illegal migration into institutional channels with Western stakeholders, who responded with enthusiasm.[24] A US delegate went as far as offering their help to install missions of immigration countries in Belgrade, in order to facilitate a smooth recruitment process.[25]

In fact, the reasons for legalizing labour migration were not exclusively economic. The narrative of the progressive nature of Yugoslav socialism that Tito's leadership had carefully constructed – drawing also on the accommodation of Hungarian refugees – was challenged by the fact that thousands of Yugoslav citizens applied for asylum abroad. The official argument defended by Yugoslav officials in international gatherings was that Yugoslavs who had found jobs abroad were permitted to emigrate. Neighbouring countries were accused of favouring asylum seekers without providing legal channels for labour migrants.[26] While there was some truth to this argument it was clearly the

[22] DAMSP, PA, UN, 1959, fasc. 149, d. 7, 414470.
[23] DAMSP, PA, UN, 1959, fasc. 149, d. 7, 415257.
[24] DAMSP, PA, UN, 1959, fasc. 149, d. 7, 415257.
[25] DAMSP, PA, UN, 1959, fasc. 149, d. 11, 428342.
[26] DAMSP, PA, UN, 1957, fasc. 116, d. 2, 415354.

Yugoslav authorities that were creating the main obstacles for prospective labour migrants. The same Yugoslav diplomats repeatedly asked their Ministry of Foreign Affairs for instructions on how to argue Yugoslavia's position, having difficulty championing this stance. Discussions over Yugoslavia's integration into the international refugee system intertwined with those on the establishment of a legal channel for the recruitment of Yugoslav workers abroad.

Yugoslavia used its constructive relationship with the UNHCR to actively counter its image as a country generating refugees and argue that its emigration was purely economic. The next step was legalizing labour migration. This would mean that Yugoslavs abroad would be regarded as *de jure* economic migrants, instead of applying for political asylum as they had done before. Such a solution was also advocated by the UN High Commissioner August R. Lindt during his 1960 visit to Yugoslavia.[27] Archival evidence shows that negotiations on this matter went hand in hand with those on the ratification of the 1951 Convention.[28] Lindt, who had to deal with the Hungarian refugee crisis at the very beginning of his mandate, displayed a conciliatory attitude towards Yugoslavia, going so far as to exert pressure on some UNHCR members in order to avoid having Yugoslavia listed among the countries of origin of refugees.[29] As a skilled diplomat, he sought to create a major consensus around the UNHCR initiatives, as an effective way of resolving the controversies (Loescher 2001, pp. 81–2). The opening up of Yugoslav borders to labour migrants contributed to repositioning Yugoslavia internationally, enforcing its distance from the countries of the Soviet bloc. Although many Yugoslav citizens continued to apply for asylum in Western countries and managed to be resettled overseas until the end of the 1960s, their status was additionally depoliticized to an extent that resonated beyond Yugoslav borders. For instance, some Hungarian diplomatic officials advocated for a similar solution that would legalize economic migration and thus neutralize political émigré organizations.[30]

In the early 1960s, while Yugoslavia took its first steps towards legalizing labour migration, an upsurge in terrorist attacks by Croatian independence activists against Yugoslav representatives abroad stirred a controversy with the international refugee agency (Tokić 2020, pp. 95–8). The fact that some of those held responsible of having supported the perpetrators enjoyed refugee status in West Germany was used by the Yugoslav delegation to discredit all anti-Yugoslav organizations abroad and to lobby for a ban on political organizations involving refugees campaigning against their country of origin.[31] In 1970, West Germany openly condemned the subversive activities of refugees against their

[27] DAMSP, PA, UN, 1960, fasc. 158, d. 8, 432431.
[28] DAMSP, PA, UN, 1960, fasc. 158, d. 8, 47237.
[29] DAMSP, PA, UN, 1960, fasc. 158, d. 8, 47566.
[30] DAMSP, PA, Italija, 1966, f. 69, 426466.
[31] DAMSP, PA, UN, 1963, fasc. 156, d. 6, 45381.

countries of origin.[32] Although there was no agreement over the boundaries between political activism and actions deemed as terrorist, this was the first evidence of a more conciliatory attitude of West Germany towards Yugoslavia. In the same year, Belgrade and Bonn signed an agreement for the recruitment of Yugoslav labour, which resulted in mass outmigration (Novinšćak 2009).

Foreign policy combined with domestic preoccupations to shape Yugoslav refugee management. This is shown most clearly by the case of Albanian refugees, the only relatively numerous refugee group that settled in Yugoslav territory. Anti-Albanian biases had influenced the Yugoslav attitude to the region, which had been ruled with an iron fist after 1945, to some extent in continuity with the interwar years. The relaxation in the sphere of internal affairs that followed the fall of the Federal Minister of the Interior Aleksandar Ranković in 1966 had visible consequences in particular for the Autonomous Province of Kosovo, where the majority of Yugoslav Albanians lived. This liberalization drive was instrumental in handing over the management of refugees accommodated outside refugee centres (including care, accommodation and job training) from the Federal Secretariat for Internal Affairs to the Federal Secretariat for Health and Social Policy, allowing more freedom of movement and employment.[33] The relationship with Albania also played a role. Against the backdrop of tense bilateral relations and an anti-Yugoslav campaign that swept Albania in the mid-1950s, Albanians who poured into the country until the late 1960s were awarded refugee status and became the target of a special integration program co-financed by the UNHCR.[34] However, from the early 1970s, the number of Albanians crossing into Yugoslavia diminished. Arguably, this was a consequence of the improvement in the relationship between Albania and Yugoslavia. Furthermore, the reduction in border crossings resulted not only from tighter control of the border on the Albanian side, but also from a policy by Yugoslavia of allegedly returning refugees who reached its territory, despite the fate awaiting those repatriated.

Yugoslavia's detachment from the Soviet bloc and its more relaxed attitude to border crossings when compared to neighbouring countries created the preconditions for the country to be framed as a space in between the Eastern and the Western blocs. Of the many Soviet bloc citizens who vacationed in Yugoslavia from the 1960s, some took the opportunity to defect.[35] Reactions from the countries of origin of escapees were swift. Yugoslavia responded to these pressures by vacillating between a tolerant attitude towards escapees and the application of policing measures that included deportation. Undocumented foreigners arrested when trying to cross the border were imprisoned. However, their

[32] DAMSP, PA, UN, 1970, fasc. 221, d. 1, 439144.
[33] Arhiv Jugoslavije (hereafter AJ), Savezno izvršno veće (130), k. 559.
[34] DAMSP, PA, UN, 1968, fasc. 212, d. 5, 411054.
[35] See OSA, East European Research and Analysis Department: Bloc (300-2), box 13.

subsequent treatment varied according to circumstances, in most cases depending on bilateral relationships with their countries of origin. In some cases, those arrested were released – frequently to immediately attempt a new escape – while in other cases they were forcibly repatriated.[36] Yugoslavia condemned the 1968 Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia, which was perceived as a direct threat to Yugoslavia's independent path (Pelikán 2008). This engendered a welcoming stance towards Czechoslovak tourists who were informed of the Soviet invasion of their country while vacationing in Yugoslavia. Committees for aid were set up and Czechoslovaks were permitted to spend extra time in Yugoslavia while waiting for the outcome of the situation at home (Vežić 2008).[37] Yugoslav authorities, willing to deliver an image representing an alternative to that of Soviet bloc countries, continued to turn a blind eye towards border crossings by Czechoslovaks lacking valid passports permitting access to the West. This trend was only temporarily reversed following repeated pressure from the authorities in Prague in the early 1980s, before being relaxed again in the following years (Pelikán &Vojtěchovský 2019).

Although an increasing number of Eastern European nationals managed to escape through Yugoslavia throughout the 1960s and 1970s, incidents continued to happen. In 1967, according to testimony, Yugoslav border guards were accused of being lenient, with escapees caught at the border being released with a warning. However, in 1967 and 1969, the Yugoslav border guards were reported as firing at Hungarians attempting to cross the Italy-Yugoslavia border.[38] Similar cases were reported in subsequent years, although they were less frequent. This ambivalent attitude, conditioned by shifts in the international arena, made Yugoslavia an uncomfortable transit area that refugees never entirely trusted.

Covered by discretion: the cooperation between Yugoslavia and the UNHCR

In the mid-1970s, negotiations over a further integration of Yugoslavia within the Western-led international refugee regime proved to be an issue of paramount importance. Although the Belgrade office of the UNHCR was closed in 1958, after the successful resettlement of all Hungarian refugees, cooperation with the UNHCR was revived in 1959, when Yugoslavia joined the UNHCR's Executive Committee – a role allegedly awarded as recognition for the successful management of the Hungarian refugee episode – and ratified the 1951 Convention.[39] At international gatherings,

[36] AJ, SIV, k. 559, Informacija o bekstvima državljana socijalističkih zemalja iz Jugoslavije na Zapad.
[37] 'Odjeci 68. godine u Rijeci na fotografijama Miljenka i Ranka Smokvine', http://www.riarhiv.hr/Pdfovi/katalogweb.pdf, accessed April 19, 2025
[38] OSA, Hungarian Unit, Subject files in English (300-40-2), box 22, Defections across Italy-Yugoslavia border; Yugoslavs catch Hungarians; Hungarian border guards shoot escapee.
[39] DAMSP, PA, UN, 1959, fasc. 149, d. 7, 410897, Obrazloženje za ratifikaciju Konvencije o statusu izbeglica iz 1959. godine.

Yugoslavia voiced the need for a 'humanitarian response' to the refugee question, which was framed as a tool intended to counteract early Cold War political instrumentalization. There was a shared belief among the personnel of the Yugoslav Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the political distortions of the international refugee regime would be more easily corrected if Yugoslavia became a fully-fledged member.[40]

The strengthening of international cooperation with the UNHCR was driven primarily by Yugoslavia's position as one of the main transit routes along the East-West axis. The appropriate moment came during the mandate of Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, who endowed the UNHCR with a new sense of global impetus, fostering both the independence and the credibility of the refugee agency. Aga Khan scheduled one of his first trips to Yugoslavia (Loescher 2001, pp. 140-200). There, he was present for the opening of the new refugee centre in Banja Koviljača (nowadays Serbia), co-financed by the UNCHR.[41] His commitment to expanding and depoliticizing the UNHCR's mandate positively resonated in Yugoslav circles and built a solid foundation for tightening cooperation.

Following negotiations between Aga Khan and the Yugoslav Government, a UNHCR office was opened in Yugoslavia and the long-serving diplomat Živojin Bulat was appointed honorary correspondent. The number of refugees drawing on UNHCR support annually escalated exponentially, starting from 26 in 1976 and reaching 2,254 in 1984.[42] The ambivalent nature of the Belgrade UNHCR office mirrored Yugoslavia's geopolitical tightrope walking. Although it was not a full-status branch office, as the UNHCR continued to advocate for, it functioned smoothly and expanded both its facilities and staff.[43] In 1984, it was moved into a more spacious building that had previously hosted the Canadian embassy.[44] With 17 employees (including two foreigners) in 1987, it was described as the largest such office in Europe.[45] Throughout the 1980s, Yugoslavia continued to act as a transit country for refugees from the Soviet Bloc. An estimated 15,725 individuals from Eastern Europe, predominantly Romanians and Czechoslovaks, passed through Yugoslavia between 1979 and 1984, while between 1975 and 1984, 11,651 were resettled through the UNHCR or as the result of international negotiations.[46] In all other cases, the Yugoslavs encouraged – or did not prevent – attempts by refugees to

[40] DAMSP, PA, UN, 1959, fasc. 149, d. 6, 48426.
[41] UNHCR Archives, F 13 S 1 2 CI, box 13, Mission en Yougoslavie 1966.
[42] UNHCR Archives, Refugee Situation – Statistics Yugoslavia (11/3/13-130.YUG), Country overview, Statistics on determination of refugee status under the mandate of the UNHCR.
[43] DAMSP, PA, OUN, 1984, fasc. 141, d. 1, 42991; DAMSP, PA, OUN, 1987, fasc. 139, d. 11, 428731.
[44] DAMSP, PA, OUN, 1984, fasc. 141, d. 1, 438254.
[45] DAMSP, PA, OUN, 1987, fasc. 139, d. 11, 426450.
[46] DAMSP, PA, OUN, 1984, fasc. 141, d. 2, 453971.

reach Italy or Austria illegally. In 1989, an estimated 10% of refugees were forcibly repatriated after pre-screening at the border by the Yugoslav police.[47]

As 97% of all refugees in transit were from socialist countries, Yugoslavia was hesitant to settle the status of the UNHCR correspondent and strove not to give publicity to this cooperation.[48] The UNHCR acknowledged Yugoslavia's sensitive position.[49] Despite the huge numbers of individuals involved, the cooperation between Yugoslavia and the UNHCR unfolded quietly. Annual statistics were not published and were only made available to countries of prospective resettlement.[50] Discretion was the watchword, as was openly stressed in most internal conversations, being constantly advocated from the Yugoslav side and promised by the UNHCR.[51] International press only sporadically paid attention to the role of Yugoslavia as a transit country for refugees. One of these occurrences happened in 1984, when accounts on the bloody route from Romania to Yugoslavia, where many refugees were killed by Romanian border guards or drowned while swimming across the Danube, made the headlines in the international press.[52] When faced with complaints from Yugoslavia, the UNHCR High Commissioner Poul Hartling stated that they were discouraging journalists from writing about these events, as they played out poorly for refugees.[53] The Yugoslav press rarely reported on the presence of Eastern European refugees, unless the circumstances of their flight were aligned with the country's foreign policy stance, as in the case of the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Although Yugoslavia had committed itself to recognizing as refugees not just those from Europe, until the late 1980s its cooperation with the UNHCR was essentially an intra-European issue, grounded in the context of the 'bipolar' world. This does not mean that no non-European refugees resided in or went through Yugoslavia, but rather that those non-Europeans mostly used different channels.

Universalist claims, differential treatment: Yugoslavia and non-European refugees

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[47] UNHCR Archives, Protection and General Legal Matters – Eligibility Statistics – Yugoslavia (11/3/63-632.YUG), Jan.-June 1989 figures.
[48] DAMSP, PA, OUN, 1984, fasc. 141, d. 2, 454689.
[49] DAMSP, PA, OUN, 1982, fasc. 142, d. 7, 450142.
[50] OSA, Czechoslovak Unit, Old Code Subject File, Old Code Subject File V (300-30-6), box 277, Nearly 2000 EE refugees sought asylum in Yugoslavia.
[51] DAMSP, PA, OUN, 1984, fasc. 141, d. 1, 447005; DAMSP; PA, OUN, 1984, fasc. 141, d. 2, 459706.
[52] See OSA, 300-60-1, box 204. For instance: Yugoslavia is escape route for many in East Bloc; Romanian refugees battle Danube; Romanian refugees swim to West under fire (Tekija); Little-known southern route for escapees is dangerous; Yugoslavia, a haven for EE refugees; Yugoslavia, transit for refugees from Communist East; Soviet bloc citizens posing problems for Yugoslavia.
[53] DAMSP, PA, OUN, 1984, fasc. 141, d. 1, 447005; OSA 300-60-1, box 200, Little-known Southern route for escapees is dangerous; OSA, 300-60-1, box 201, Romanian-Yugoslav border the bloodiest in Europe; Rights organization says 400 died at Romanian-Yugoslav border.

In the last few years, scholarship on Eastern Europe has experienced a comprehensive shift, bringing to the fore a dense network of relationships between the Second and Third Worlds, which involved the circulation of knowledge, trends, and individuals (Mark & Betts 2022). This was especially relevant for Yugoslavia. As one of the promoters of the Non-Aligned Movement, the country cultivated strong connections with the Global South and backed attempts to reshape international relationships (Stubbs 2023). Solidarity with oppressed peoples was presented openly as a moral imperative, as it was the struggle against racial discrimination (Brković 2024). Scholarly examination has sketched a nuanced picture in which the internalization of NAM principles by Yugoslav citizens, especially via everyday contacts, coexisted with the persistence of racial biases. According to some scholars, its vocal support for decolonization prevented Yugoslav society from critically addressing the North-South subaltern relationship that it had internalized (Baker 2018; Subotić & Vučetić 2019; Rucker-Chang 2020).

Yugoslav refugee policies fit into this framework. A staunch critic of the geographical limitation to the 1951 Convention (committing member states to protect only refugees escaping as a consequence of events occurring in Europe), Yugoslavia constantly advocated for the universal application of refugee rights and advanced its standing through humanitarian efforts. The 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, which removed the geographical limitations of the 1951 Refuge Convention, expanding the commitment of signatory states beyond Europe, epitomized the inception of a new era, marked by a global shift and a major detachment of the UNHCR from the Western sphere of interest. The refugee agency pursued a mediatory stance in order to establish itself as relatively independent from the Western bloc and expand its activities towards the Global South. It also cultivated relationships with all the actors involved in conflicts, including liberation movements (Elie 2007, p. 14). This shift was fully in line with Yugoslav foreign policy.[54] Humanitarian actions in support of refugees from Indochina, Central Africa, Mozambique, Guinea Bissau, and the Horn of Africa were only a few of the many instances.[55]

From the very beginning, Yugoslavia recognized the global dimension of refugee policies as instrumental in advancing its agenda. A striking example of this was its participation in World Refugee Year in 1959–1960, organized by the United Nations. Being suspicious of the whole initiative, which it regarded as a breeding ground for anti-

[54] DAMSP, PA, UN, 1968, fasc. 212, d, 5, 436741.
[55] DAMSP, PA, UN, 1976, fasc. 204, d. 1, 42735 and 411826.

communism, Yugoslavia avoided an open endorsement. President Tito refused to make a speech to open the campaign.[56] However, rather than boycotting the initiative, as the Soviet Union did, Yugoslavia used this platform to carve a niche for itself by backing its allies, drawing on the willingness of the UNHCR to have non-aligned Yugoslavia in its ranks. Yugoslavia's participation in World Refugee Year was limited to assistance in kind to Algerian refugees.[57] Additionally, in 1959, Yugoslavia used its brand-new role on the UNHCR's Executive Committee to repeatedly advocate for a major commitment in support of the Algerian refugees in Morocco and Tunisia (Tot 2023).[58] The Algerian episode was key for the UNHCR's repositioning in respect of Cold War rivalry (Rahal & White 2022). In fact, it did not just represent a first step towards the globalization and universal application of the refugee regime, but the refugee agency dared to create a conflict over decolonization with France (Elie 2007, p. 7). It also represented the first time that the UNHCR received financial contributions from both the East and the West, and humanitarian aid became part of the nascent competition between the blocs on African soil (Loescher 2001, pp. 97-101). The amount of aid that Yugoslavia dispatched through diplomatic channels was low, even when compared to other socialist countries.[59] Nonetheless, the meagre resources allocated by the Yugoslav state directly were complemented by those delivered by socio-political organizations under the umbrella of the Socialist Alliance of Working People of Yugoslavia (SSRNJ). As had happened in other circumstances, in order not to alienate France, the Yugoslav Government delegated its role of aid giver to other bodies, which nonetheless had a close relationship with the State (Tot 2024).

From the late 1960s, the Socialist Alliance of Working People of Yugoslavia engaged in several solidarity initiatives supporting peoples involved in decolonization struggles worldwide (Đureinović 2024). Humanitarian aid to refugees and, more broadly, civilians in need was only one of the areas of intervention, along with military and economic aid and educational and technical training. This was in line with the stated aim of the Socialist Alliance for its actions relating to international solidarity. As the Socialist Alliance pointed out when the first campaign in support of Arabic countries was launched during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, that was 'not regarded exclusively as a humanitarian accomplishment [*humanitarni čin*] and [an act of] compassion with the victims of aggression, but first of all as an expression of political awareness, internationalist spirit and solidarity of our working peoples'.[60] While international

[56] DAMSP, PA, UN, 1959, fasc. 149, d. 8, 415729.
[57] UNHCR Archives, 1959 vol. 2 Fond 10C, box 2 ARC 284, Y. participating in World Refugee Year and ratification of the 1951 Convention considered (October 1959).
[58] DAMSP, PA, UN, 1959, fasc. 149, d. 7, 410897, Zabeleška o apelu Visokog komesara za izbeglice za pružanje pomoći alžirskim izbeglicama, February 20, 1959.
[59] DAMSP, PA, UN, 1959, fasc. 149, d. 7, 413456.
[60] Hrvatski državni arhiv, Socijalistički savez radnog naroda Hrvatske. Republička konferencija (1288), k. 688, Informacija o aktivnosti SSRN Srbije povodom događaja na Bliskom Istoku i u organizovanju prikupljanja pomoći arapskim zemljama, 6-7.

solidarity was framed as a tool for mobilizing Yugoslav society, it was clear that the figure of the 'refugee', viewed as a passive recipient of aid, fit only marginally within the main framework.

The idea that solidarity was to be shown primarily with like-minded refugees instead of being based on universalist principles emerged in an exchange between the Yugoslav authorities regarding a house for disabled people in Pristina. The expansion of a previous facility through the addition of a new wing was co-financed by the UNHCR, as the clinic was meant to accommodate 90 disabled or elderly Albanian refugees.[61] However, it soon became apparent that no Albanian refugees were to be housed there, as those in need had either passed away or were taken care of by their families. The UNHCR therefore began to exert pressure on the Yugoslav Government to take in disabled refugees from other countries. The conditions proposed by the Yugoslavs were that refugees had to be members of liberation movements and that Yugoslavia could decide whom to welcome.[62] In 1984, the Pristina facility hosted a contingent of wounded Palestinians from the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Nonetheless, Yugoslavia continued to argue against the integration of those refugees within the country.[63] Ideological affinities did not distract the Yugoslav authorities from one of their main commitments: turning down the proposal for resettlement or integration of even small contingents of refugees, but maintaining the role ascribed to Yugoslavia as exclusively a transit country (Rolandi 2025). This was hardly an isolated case. Despite its declared willingness to advance cooperation with the UNHCR, Yugoslavia refused to be involved in resettlement schemes for small numbers of refugees. For instance, in 1972, Yugoslavia turned down a request from the UNHCR to open its resorts in the low tourist season to 200-300 refugees of Asian origin from Uganda.[64]

Yugoslavia's adherence to the principle of non-interference in internal affairs of other countries, which was shared by many NAM partners, played out poorly for refugees coming from these countries. In 1984, an association of Kurdish and Assyrian refugees in Teheran accused the Yugoslav authorities of having mistreated Kurdish refugees from Iraq and having turned them over to agents of the Iraqi security services. Although the allegation should be seen in the context of the propaganda war between Iraq and Iran, it is plausible that the Yugoslav Government refused to accept refugees whose presence could damage relationships with an allied country.[65] Similarly, another documented case illustrates how geopolitical interests prevailed over humanitarian considerations. In 1984, the UNHCR office in Geneva

[61] UNHCR Archives, fond 11, series 2, (11/2/10-100.GEN.YUG), box 213, Refugees from Albania in Yugoslavia Integration of Albanian refugees in Kosovo (Yugoslavia) and medical equipment for the amelioration and completion of the Clinic in the service of the Aged People in Pristina, 5 April 1979.
[62] DAMSP, PA, OUN 1982, fasc. 142, d. 6, 430208.
[63] DAMSP, PA, OUN 1984, fasc. 141, d. 1, 42991; OUN, 1985, fasc. 146, d. 2, 434509.
[64] DAMSP, PA, UN, 1972, fasc. 168, d. 1, 439512.
[65] DAMSP, PA, OUN, 1984, fasc. 141, d. 1, 414943; DAMSP, PA, OUN, 1982, fasc. 142, d. 7, 448766.

appealed to Yugoslavia in a case related to four Iraqi and two Palestinian nationals who found themselves in Romania and wanted to put themselves under UNHCR protection. As no UNHCR representation existed in the country, they needed to be allowed into Yugoslavia in order to be easily resettled. While most diplomatic circles supported this approach, the Middle East Office within the Yugoslav Ministry of Foreign Affairs warned of a possible negative reaction from the Iraqi Government, which was deemed to be 'against Yugoslavia's interests'.[66] The request was ultimately rejected.[67]

The relationships within the NAM frequently acted as a mutual support between states at the expense of refugees. In a few instances, North-South hierarchies were even reversed. This was the case in the late 1950s, when members of a Yugoslav delegation in a development aid mission in Ethiopia asked for UNHCR intervention to avoid returning to Yugoslavia. Ethiopia opposed any international intervention on the ground that the Yugoslav citizens were not political refugees. Following agreement with the Yugoslav authorities, they were resettled in the interior of the country, where the dire living conditions would have likely convinced them to return home.[68] Other applicants from Africa and Latin America submitted requests to be admitted to Yugoslavia for scholarships or health visits.[69] The emphasis placed on their revolutionary credentials did not pay off, as their requests were almost never granted. However, among the many non-European students who enrolled in Yugoslav universities there were apparently some *de facto* refugees. Students were usually selected on the basis of their political capital, and they reached Yugoslavia through established and trusted channels such as trade unions or students' organizations.[70] According to some estimates, roughly 10% of all foreign students enrolled at Yugoslav universities were stateless (Dugonjic-Rodwin & Mladenović 2023, pp. 338, 340). Some students also overstayed after their scholarships ended, being unwilling to return to their own countries. The Yugoslav Red Cross collection in the Yugoslav archives contains a number of references to such cases, although their outcome is unclear.[71] In fact, in the 1980s, although only a small number of non-European refugees applied for asylum in Yugoslavia, these were the refugees who experienced the most difficult journeys. Between 1976 and 1985, 425 non-Europeans applied for asylum in Yugoslavia, compared with 14,292 Eastern European asylum seekers. Yugoslav authorities probably discouraged or prevented many such applications.[72] Such a discriminatory practice was driven by the fact that non-European refugees were more likely to become a burden, given their difficulties in terms of being accepted by countries of resettlement (Rolandi 2025). Once again, pragmatic preoccupations played a major role in shaping Yugoslavia's

[66] DAMSP, PA, OUN, 1984, fasc. 141, d. 1, 447720.
[67] DAMSP, PA, OUN, 1984, fasc. 141, d. 2, 459706.
[68] DAMSP, PA, UN, 1959, fasc. 149, d. 11, 430036.
[69] DAMSP, PA, Jugoslavija, 1965, fasc. 77, Folder Pravo azila; DA, Jugoslavija, 1970, fasc. 99. d. 4, 429828.
[70] On foreign students see Lazić 2009; Radonjić 2020; Wright 2021, p. 463.
[71] AJ, Crveni Krst Jugoslavije (731), k. 200.
[72] UNHCR Archives, Refugee Situations. Statistics Yugoslavia (11/3/11-120.YUG), Ten years refugee statistics 1976-1985.

refugee policy. Non-European refugees seemed to sneak between the cracks of a system that was officially committed to their protection.

Conclusion

Throughout the post-war decades, Yugoslavia moved from being a hard-line follower of the Stalinist model to theorizing and implementing an alternative model of socialism informed by self-management, liberalization in the domestic sphere and a creative geopolitical positioning. By looking at both incoming and outgoing migration flows, this article has explored impact of Yugoslavia's hybrid position on its attitude toward different groups of refugees. According to the Yugoslav Constitutions of 1963 and 1974, asylum was to be awarded to foreign (or stateless) nationals persecuted because of their commitment to democratic ideas or movements, for social and national liberation, and the freedom of scientific and cultural work.[73] The way this concept was conceived in the Constitutions and laws on foreign nationals was very much reminiscent of similar formulations in other socialist countries, which committed themselves to protecting only like-minded refugees. Although the 1973 Law on Foreign Nationals extended its provisions to cover those persecuted because of 'ethnic origin, race and religion', the political element remained crucial.[74] This ideologically-driven understanding of solidarity, merging socialist thinking and decolonizing aspirations, was advocated internationally as a new model for reshaping global relations (Brković 2023). The UNHCR delegation that visited Yugoslavia and local authorities discussed the fact that Yugoslavia committed itself to providing asylum exclusively to ideological peers.[75] Yet, this did not prevent cooperation with the international agency.

Quite often, ideological stances clashed with their implementation. Throughout its history, Yugoslavia, a one-party state that did not tolerate political opposition, found itself in the odd position of providing a conditional refuge, in most cases temporary, predominantly to escapees from the Soviet bloc who did not fit into its ideological framework. At the same time, despite the country being a vocal supporter of a universalized approach to refugee rights, non-European refugees in Yugoslavia were mainly positioned outside this framework. This was only apparently a paradox. Since its inception, Yugoslavia's autonomous path to socialism gained legitimacy through foreign policy. As people on the move

[73] See Article 65 of the 1963 Constitution, and Article 202 of the 1974 Constitution.
[74] OSA, 300-10-2, box 166, Legalities of political asylum in Yugoslavia.
[75] UNHCR Archives, Mission to Yugoslavia (4-8 June 1966), Memorandum Your mission to Yugoslavia, E. Jahn to the High Commissioner, June 2, 1966.

became a point of confrontation between the two blocs, Yugoslavia tried to establish itself as a reliable partner for Western countries. This had to be done without investing too many resources that the country lacked, without enraging the countries of origin of refugees, and without acquiring an unwanted burden of refugees that were hard to resettle.

By the early 1980s, the transition from being a country generating refugees to a fully-fledged member of the international refugee regime – albeit with special status – was complete. The main milestones in this process had been its successful attempt to legalize external migration, thus countering the potentially unsettling effects of defections, and the silent cooperation with the UNHCR that allowed Eastern European refugees to reach the Western bloc. As Yugoslavia was increasingly regarded as a safe country, the opportunities for those claiming to be persecuted tightened to the point that they became stigmatized, even in cases of real discrimination or repression. For instance, Kosovo Albanians often declared themselves as being from Albania once they reached Italy so as not to be deported back, as often happened with Yugoslav citizens.[76] In 1987, Norway warned Yugoslavia of the dramatic increase in asylum applications submitted by Yugoslavs claiming to be politically persecuted. The Norwegian authorities maintained a policy of deporting Yugoslav asylum seekers whose applications were rejected.[77] The crumbling economic situation and the rise of nationalism led to a stark increase in its most disadvantaged citizens seeking asylum in Northern Europe.[78] Most of the new asylum seekers from Yugoslavia were Albanians and Roma. Sticking to the definition of 'safe country' was beneficial to both Yugoslavia and countries where Yugoslav citizens submitted asylum requests. Unsurprisingly, at a time when refugee policies were narrowing, Western countries agreed to repatriate them, but they exerted increasing pressure on Yugoslavia to control its citizens.

The 'imperfect' position that Yugoslavia held in the international refugee regime was made possible by the UNHCR's willingness to count at least one socialist country within its ranks and to mitigate earlier attempts at waging a Cold War through refugee policies. Additionally, the comprehensive shift in refugee policies was advocated by both the UNHCR and the Yugoslav authorities. As Yugoslavia imposed itself as an alternative to both the Eastern and Western blocs, it became a champion of the idea that refugee policies should be detached from Cold War dynamics. The slogan of 'depoliticizing the refugee question' summed up by the use of the term 'humanitarian' was clearly a political stance that Yugoslavia used to carve a niche for itself in the international landscape. Moreover, Belgrade not only used its

[76] DAMSP, PA, OUN, 1985, fasc. 146, d. 1, 4852; Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Ministero dell'Interno. Gabinetto, 1981-1985, b. 502, Appunto per il MI, March 27, 1984.
[77] DAMSP, PA, OUN, 1987, fasc. 139, d. 11, 444477.
[78] UNHCR Archives, Records of the Central Registry, Refugee situations, Romanian refugees in Yugoslavia (11/3/10-100.YUG.ROM), "Yugoslavia is (not) a refugee country".

participation in the international refugee regime to enhance its global standing. By legalizing labour migration, it also strove to distance itself from other socialist countries whose legitimacy was questioned by defections. The restrictive migration policies in force in all the countries of the Soviet bloc, epitomized by the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961, contributed to politicizing any outflow. This was attested by the categorization of Yugoslav asylum seekers in Western Europe. Once it allowed external labour migration, Yugoslavia had an easy task in downplaying anti-Yugoslav platforms cultivated in diaspora communities. All in all, the hybridity of the Yugoslav political project had an impact on its migration policies and refugee regime, which were originally a blend of provisions and patterns borrowed from the different spheres of the Cold War landscape. The result was a tight balance influenced more by diplomatic calculations and pragmatic preoccupations than by ideological commitments.

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