

Social (De)precarisation in the Context of Post-Yugoslav Forced Migrations: Narratives from Vojvodina

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The Yugoslav wars, which raged through the 1990s, not only put an end to the post-World War II Yugoslav socialist federation but also had a profound impact on the everyday realities of sensemaking, social identification, community building, and the securing of livelihoods in the region for decades to come. The aim of this research article – based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Vojvodina, Serbia, in 2022 – is to examine the dynamic interplay between social precarisation and deprecarisation in the context of forced migrations triggered by these armed conflicts, through a critical constructivist framework. It is based on qualitative analysis of narratives and practices of individuals who fled the territories of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina to Serbia, and operates with the post-Yugoslav shared space of discourse as its main analytical frame. It emphasises a transnational reality of material and ideological efforts to tackle the loss of home, important social relationships, and trust. It shows how post-migration means of making sense of multifaceted conflicts, alliances, and processes of identification in the realm of (co)ethnicity, politics, and (moral) economy render contemporary nationalist projects ambiguous and unstable by interconnecting various pre- and post-war experiences which transcend clear-cut, mainly ethno-religious and national, boundaries.

Keywords: precarisation, deprecarisation, post-Yugoslav shared space of discourse, forced migration, sensemaking, social identification, Vojvodina

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The making of post-Yugoslav realities was intrinsically characterised by the demise of not only the socialist regime but the entire state (Verdery, 1999: 96). This demise – ensured by the war primarily set in motion by Slobodan Milošević and political–military leadership in Serbia (Meier, 1999[1995]: 133–151; Ramet, 2005: 119) – claimed several hundred thousand lives and displaced between 3 and 4 million people (Gavrilović, 2017: 64; UNHCR, n.d.). This article is an endeavour to further unravel some of the consequences of these phenomena by focusing on contemporary narratives of persons widely categorised as “Serbian refugees” and their experiences of the precarisation–deprecarisation nexus. The main line of analysis moves through the social, (micro)political and economic spheres of informants’ lives. Without trying to relativise violence, suffering and extensive losses, I argue in favour of more nuanced, complex and dynamic interpretation of war-induced uncertainties in order to overcome simplistic victimisation of “refugees” which strips them of agency and mechanistically attaches them to national interests, histories and statistics.

The analysis presented in the article is based on six weeks of ethnographic fieldwork conducted from the beginning of August until mid-September 2022 in a regional city in Vojvodina, Serbia’s northern autonomous province. The original purpose of the research was to create an empirical base for my Master’s thesis by reconstructing narratives of forced migrants from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina living in Vojvodina, focusing on their pre-war life, migration experiences, and life in post-migration settings, in combination with participant observations of their current circumstances. I intended to explore mechanisms and processes of (co)ethnic identification, uncover other important axes of social identification, and understand roles and meanings of translocality within the process of forced migration.

Although the research did not initially centre on precarisation and deprecarisation, these issues soon emerged as key elements in the semi-structured interviews. Gradually, I realised that issues of ethnicity and social identification in the context of forced migration can be better understood by considering broader precarious sociocultural, political and economic circumstances, and vice versa. Setting clear boundaries between ethnicity and social identification on the one hand and precarious circumstances on the other would be much more difficult – if even possible and productive – than immersion in the intricacies of their entanglement.

My approach to untangling some aspects of this constellation – namely concrete forms of interaction between uncertainties and experiences of displacement induced by the post-Yugoslav wars and the social consequences of various forms of precarisation narratively reflected on – is wrapped around a concept that I term the “post-Yugoslav shared space(s) of discourse”. This tool, attentive to intersections, (de)construction of boundaries, and dynamics of identification, represents an attempt at creating an analytically tangible frame through which commonalities, but also processes setting different actors apart, can be understood through the shared experiences, values, and conflicts that mark the post-Yugoslav transformations. Thus, research participants’ post-migration realities, marked by uncertainties as well as

deprecarisational processes, are situated within relations that transcend national boundaries by means of (post-)Yugoslav referential points, memories, and aspirations, even if they are usually actualised within co-ethnic spheres.

Co-ethnic post-Yugoslav migration studies have successfully demonstrated ambiguities of “ethnically privileged” forced migrations (Čapo Žmegač, 2005: 200), that is movements of forced migrants to their “ethnic homelands” (Čapo Žmegač, 2007: 27), by focusing on conflictual relationships between “migrant” and “local” “co-ethnics” through various processes of social differentiation, exclusion and narratives of identification (Čapo Žmegač, 2007; Čapo Žmegač, 2010; Dragojević, 2014; Zlatanović, 2015). My article contextually builds on this base, while avoiding approaches that fix “refugees” as prototypical nationalists representing the moods of society (e.g. Simić, 2006) or impose the sense of state-managed normative integration based on view of incompatible essentialised historically/geographically defined cultural models (e.g. Gavrilović, 2007). Additionally, I rely more broadly on the criticism of methodological nationalism that emphasises the importance of a transnational prism when dealing with processes of migration and the (re)production of (not only) national discourses (Kovačević Bielicki, 2016; Wimmer, Glick-Schiller, 2002). I suggest that processes of precarisation connected to the war and forced migration should not be seen in absolute terms but in relation to deprecaring elements, patches or wider strategies of evaluating and taking control of “balance-disturbing” situations, situated within broader translocal discursive spheres, such as the post-Yugoslav shared space of discourse.

Some Notes on Social (De)precarisation

Intersections between war refugeehood and precarisation could appear as a materialisation of mere “primordial” violence, suffering and liminal uprootedness, completely distinct from precarity as frequently understood as a global(ising) political-economic condition connected to profound labour-related insecurities crawling into all spheres of life (Millar, 2017; Standing, 2011) – thus producing an impression of a sharp binary demarcation between seemingly irreconcilable perspectives on (in)securities and (un)certainities (Han, 2018).

Perspective on precarisation applied in my article stems from Ettlinger’s (2007; 2020; 2021) endeavours to unbind precarity and widen its analytical scope beyond not only post-Fordist neoliberal transformation but economisation in general. Everyday microspaces are postulated as arenas of ever-present uncertainties and vulnerabilities “with deleterious consequences” (Ettlinger, 2021: 95) simultaneously met with processes of constructing certainty (Ettlinger, 2007: 320). This construction of certainty, or “struggle” against profoundly uncertain emergent conditions, is what I understand as *deprecarisation*. Thus, precarisation and deprecarisation form a dialectical nexus which cannot be objectively resolved – it is tied to unpredictable

power shifts and variability in social reactions depending on differing contextual-experiential subjectivities (Ettlinger, 2021: 93–94, 111).

Additionally, Butler's (2004) perspective on global uncertainties foregrounds human interdependence – and vulnerability to loss implied by that interdependence. In politically highly aggressive conditions, “humanity” can hardly be defined as a unified homogeneous category with all its member parts being uniformly intertwined. However, it is precisely these questions of humanness and the denial of humanness that are a part of social and physical vulnerability stemming from formations of social attachment and mutuality (Butler, 2004: 20). Ultimately, the issue of precarious life is a political one since (un)certainity, (in)security, vulnerability and value for life are usually unequally distributed by asymmetric social and economic organisations (Butler, 2012: 148).

Social (de)precarisation, then, implies a primary focus on lived experiences of deleteriously transformed everyday contexts concerning the dynamics of (de)constructing social relationships and interdependencies. It refers to a dialectical interplay between profound life-changing social ruptures and the processes of navigating through them, connecting the political, economic, and sociocultural dimensions of (un)certainities. Even though I use the term “forced migration” to highlight movements of research participants who were triggered to migrate by events they felt exerted a strong pushing force and which created contexts with extremely limited options, this conceptualisation of (de)precarisation simultaneously challenges fixation on these migrations as unarguably structurally confining and seeks actualisations of agency, without ignoring its limitations (Jovanović, 2019: 597; Korac, 2009: 6).

The Post-Yugoslav Shared Space of Discourse

My approach to social (de)precarisation in the context of post-Yugoslav forced migrations is tied to a concept that I term the post-Yugoslav shared space of discourse. This analytical construct is directly inspired by works of Pnina Werbner (2002; 2019) and Stef Jansen (1998; 2005), whose theoretical assumptions and empirical observations I have adapted to my specific case. Although concerned with different historical phenomena and geopolitical areas, their approaches are linked through an anti-essentialist discursive view of identification, politics, and reaction to social transformations, in a broader sense connected to (post-)constructivist, critical-of-groupism, and dynamic–intersectional perspectives (e.g. Brubaker, 2004; Sökefeld, 1999; Sökefeld, 2001).

As a part of her situationist–intersectional critique of older Barthian models that postulate the issue of (ethnic) identities in relatively one-sided ecological frameworks, Werbner (2019: 118–120) analyses intragroup relations within “shared spaces of dialogue”, specifically referred to as the “diasporic public sphere” in the context of her research into Pakistani diasporic communities in the United Kingdom. This sphere

– imagined as multiple fluid arenas of the encounter of diverse interests, attitudes, values, sociocultural representations, and performances – is often marked by conflicts, but social fragmentation is not a priori assumed (Werbner, 2002: 15; Werbner, 2019: 120). And, I dare say, neither is homogenous unity. Therefore, multiplicity is seen as a regular part of any social grouping. Furthermore, conflicts could be seen as a force partaking in (re)production of (ethnic) identities in relation to national centres, but nevertheless, dynamic boundaries account for situationally shifting allegiances and webs of cooperation beyond nationally defined diasporas (Werbner, 2002: 16; Werbner, 2019: 123–126). Additionally, the dialogical character ascribed to these spaces refers to streams of arguments which flow from usually conflicting ends, without necessarily reaching agreement (Werbner, 2002: 8). The shifting of boundaries in this case shatters the image of a unified and unchanging Pakistani diaspora, which has been entangled with Muslim, South Asian, or anti-war coalitions, depending on the reference points of the narratives and actual political organising (Werbner, 2019: 121–124).

While Werbner's influence on my theoretical thinking lies in the conceptual framing of relations between discourse, identification, translocality, and power, Jansen's works are important for theoretical and practical thinking within the (post-)Yugoslav contexts. His analysis of discursive practices as a form of resistance to nationalism operate within the framework of a shared Yugoslav cultural space, mainly in a sense of discursive background for anti-nationalist and anti-militarist currents in the aftermath of the dissolution of Yugoslavia (Jansen, 1998: 91; Jansen, 2005: 106–111). This multidimensional framework manifests materially as a physical space of the former state (albeit intersected by the borders of its successor states), symbolically as a "home", discursively as a frame and object of discursive practices, and politically as a conflict point between different political perspectives, simultaneously expressing their distinctions. Characterised by fluidity and situationally shifting axes of identification (Jansen, 2005: 108–110), it also sheds light on a relational nature of post-Yugoslav transformations by overcoming simplistic schemes of the "transition" to completely bounded homogenous nation-states distinguished by unique essences. Nostalgia and discourses on the past are, in this manner, contextualised as a part of present conflicts, solidarities, and politics of defining (trans)local realities.

Translating these ideas to my case, I see the post-Yugoslav shared space of discourse as a dynamic sphere encompassing flows of migrants' experiential–narrative identification processes problematising aspects of lived post-migration realities. The "post-Yugoslav" designation captures its openness toward elements and connections outside the boundaries of Serbia and post-migration localities. However, it is not a priori coterminous with all (post-)Yugoslav territories but usually connects points within informants' experiential range. As a result, it can be understood as a field in which pre-war and post-migration realities are connected through transtemporal and trans-spatial references. Its "shared" character, on the one hand, indicates a presence of a widened sensemaking sphere in cases of all research participants

through similar discourses on their post-Yugoslav positions. On the other hand, it also implies the presence of other actors in informants' stories, connected through common experiences, attitudes, and values, or just shared points of reference around which arguments of identification develop. Therefore, the character of the post-Yugoslav shared space of discourse is usually dialogical and argumentative, but I define it more broadly in terms of discourses since I approach it mainly through informants' discourses. A shared Yugoslav past can be seen as a background enabling arguments and identification to be discursively formed at the same referential level. However, in contrast to Jansen's concept – which is tailored to capture discursive practices of actors who can be described as anti-nationalist “elite” (that is, activists, scientists, and artists connected through shared vision of a common cultural space and who often emphasise and elaborate Yugoslav identification) – my version deals with cases that are not a part of elaborated and organised anti-nationalist currents. Consequently, the post-Yugoslav shared space of discourse is concerned with somewhat scattered personal experiences of the (de)construction of interdependencies and conflicts.

Methodology

Qualitative data collection by means of semi-structured and unstructured ethnographic interviews and participant observations took place in a regional city in Banat – the eastern part of Vojvodina – and its surrounding settlements, hereinafter referred to as RC for reasons of anonymisation. During the 1990s, the total number of registered Yugoslav war refugees in RC reached 15,000, among 646,066 in the entire Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (UNHCR et al., 1996: 19). Now, in RC they number around 300, owing to the acquisition of Serbian citizenship, readmission, or migration to other cities or other, usually EU, countries. A formal collective refugee centre run by local authorities and an informal centre managed by occupants themselves were opened, outlasting the war by approximately 10 and 15 years, respectively.

The bulk of the participant base was formed of nine women and ten men aged between thirty-eight and eighty-five years of age who had directly experienced war migration, fleeing from the territories of Croatia (nine participants) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (ten) to Serbia between 1991 and 1997. Formal refugee status was not a necessary selection criterion, although all of them had been initially granted it. At the time of the research, only one informant still retained it – others were granted Serbian citizenship. Participant selection was based on non-probability sampling combining purposive and snowball sampling, mainly with the help of two gatekeepers: an official of the local commissariat for refugees and migration, and a former refugee who was also an informant. With regard to education levels, up to secondary education predominated (twelve participants); three participants had incomplete primary education, one participant had a primary education, and three participants had an academic degree. Other important “non-refugee” informants were the

aforementioned commissariat representative and two municipal officials formerly linked to projects pertaining to forced migrants.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews – 17 in total – carried out in Serbo-Croatian¹ served as the primary narrative data collection tool, linking diverse life histories, personal experiences of forced migration and post-migration processes, and emic attitudes and perceptions, as well as broader sociopolitical projects within and beyond the (post-)Yugoslav space. The aim was to understand forced migration in connection with other life phases of the respondents in a processual manner (Eastmond, 2007). All interviews were audio-recorded with respondents' consent. They took place typically at respondents' homes, but also at their workplaces, cafés, and various public places. They were exclusively face-to-face and mostly one-on-one, except for three group interviews. Respondents were provided space to freely narrate their lives, albeit in combination with a loosely defined set of themes and questions to efficiently use quite limited research time. I always tried to be an "attentive listener" rather than an "intrusive investigator" (Malkki, 1995: 51) by carefully observing respondents' reactions and general atmosphere, often avoiding numerous "important" questions that could aggravate emotional distress or sever the rapport – for example, in many cases anything directly connected to contemporary formal politics.

Contextual data, but also details complementing and deepening the aspects of semi-structured interviews, were obtained through participant observations and informal unstructured interviews, which commonly merged into one method, simultaneously serving as a means of building rapport. These informal interactions unfolded in a variety of ways, for example, before or after in-depth interviews, or while picking fruit in informants' gardens, clearing up after evening gatherings, visiting informants at a marketplace, cycling, or strolling. Also, frequent unstructured conversations with a commissariat official were an important means of understanding their experiences and the dynamics of relations between institutions and (former) refugees.

(De)precarised Interdependencies, Politicised Lives

I have nothing to be ashamed of – only of those who welcomed us in that way, and of those who expelled us. (Živana, 67)

Hot August day in 2022. Second week in the field. A new "refugee" apartment building behind an infinity of family houses, on a sun-baked meadow on the outskirts of the city. Refugeehood, military aggression, destruction of lives and homes, loss,

1 I am aware of a politically controversial status of this designation that encompasses standardised varieties of Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian and Montenegrin, but many informants used dialects that would not be considered a part of a "narrower" Serbian variety.

a question on my mind – will I ever be able to understand this experience beyond physical and emotional suffering, without excessive relativisation? In the following moments, however, a visit and conversation at informant Živana's² home – especially her words opening this analytical section – proved quite demystifying. As soon as I sat down at the table in her living room, Živana brought Cedevita from the kitchen – a powdered drink produced in Croatia and popular across the former Yugoslav republics. She also held a bottle in her hand, which she said contained pure spring water from Dalmatia. She had returned from a month-long vacation there with her son and grandchildren the evening before our interview. It was from there that, on a similar August day in 1995, she had set out on a “journey” to Serbia with her children. The next moment, while we were going through the formal procedures of obtaining informed consent for participation and audio recording, she resolutely delivered the line which opens this section: that she has “nothing to be ashamed of”. Živana explained that she has “nothing to hide”, stating that she was also interviewed in front of the cameras while receiving the keys of new apartments as part of the municipal project three years ago, together with ten other families.

The informants I met with during my fieldwork were apparently interconnected only by the fact that RC was their common “endpoint”, at least at that time, and by the fact that they were categorised as “refugees”. Only a small minority of them still self-identified as refugees, even though it was a standard designation in narratives about their relationship with the “locals”. Their general migration trajectories varied in terms of starting points and the convolutedness of their journey, the intensity and character of the armed conflicts they had experienced, the breadth of accessible economic capital, their skills and social networks, their experiences upon crossing the border of Serbia, the extent of relationships with “locals”, and the character of their relationship with places they abandoned.

Is it possible to identify common patterns by resorting to the binary model of “ethnic unmixing” and “ethnic affinity” (Brubaker, 1998: 1047)? This model seems like a suitable tool for making sense of social consequences of “constitutional nationalism” (Hayden, 1992) accompanying post-Yugoslav transformations, since it captures migration processes generated by the “nationalization of political space” (Brubaker, 1998: 1063). Indeed, all interlocutors in RC reflected on their refugeehood being rooted in the dialectic of ethnonational violence as a pushing precarisational force and their search for a haven in Serbia, the “ethnic homeland”, as a pulling, *deprecarisational* force.

And yet, when reconsidering Živana's statement, this model only superficially explains migrants' realities. Her statement may have been simple, but it can be understood as a sensemaking triad capturing dynamic, rarely if ever certain, relations linking the collapse of pre-war forms of sociality, expectations of the “ethnic

2 All informants' names are changed for anonymity.

homeland” (Čapo Žmegač, 2007: 27), and the dialectic of self-identification and categorisation (Jenkins, 2014). Based on this problematisation of post-war or post-migration realities, I began theorising on an experiential sphere connecting critical attitudes of research participants – already outlined as a “post-Yugoslav shared space of discourse”. Hence, the triadic relation between “those who expelled”, “those who welcomed”, and the informant herself (who is in the position of both a victim and an active social evaluator) keeps this experiential sphere widened. While retaining a space for dealing with the war and plights of forced migration, it expands somewhat simplistic “push–pull factor” models and challenges the ethnically defined linearity of precarisation-deprecarisation processes.

The following excerpt from an interview with Obrad (65), a university-educated family business owner and pre-war administrative worker in a state-owned company, can further illustrate dynamics of social (un)certainities in the realm of (broken) interdependencies.

Everyone there had a friend or acquaintance from other denominations, *for sure*.³ And then, somehow the ties started to tear, and I’ll tell you why. Because, let’s say, if somebody is a Croat by nationality, and is friends with Serbs, they [other Croats] immediately started to curse and bully him,⁴ “What are you doing with a Serb?!” *And vice versa*. Or with a Muslim. ... Let’s face it, there were pressures too, to break up mixed marriages, and there were a lot of them. *Who hasn’t done that?* Only stable families, strong people who didn’t want to give in to those pressures, they have kept the marriages going, which is a perfectly normal thing. ... And I have never been a partaker in that, or malleable to the masses. ... I have *my own attitude*, my opinion. ... So if somebody told me now, “No, don’t, this one is Hungarian, this one Slovak, this one Rusyn, like, don’t be friends with them.” What do you care who I spend my time with?! I simply don’t care about that opinion! (Obrad, 65)

Together with inter-ethnic violence, intra-ethnic mechanisms of control which sustain an image of groupness – that is, of alleged clearly demarcated conflicting ethnic groups (Brubaker, 2004: 19–20, 99) – are presented in this quote as nationalist pressure to sever all inter-ethnic relations and maintain ethnic purity. This pressure also appears in the form of verbal abuse, torture, imprisonment, and even execution in other informants’ stories and is precisely what created the atmosphere of everyday precarisation. Informants’ usual feelings of anger and disappointment – manifested most intensely by those who collectively fled the Republic of Serbian Krajina⁵ and adjacent territories during the joint military and police operations of the Croatian state in 1995, Živana being one of them – were directed at actors they deemed

3 Italics in interview transcripts indicate words emphasised by informants.

4 Generic masculine present in transcripts is original informants’ wording.

responsible for termination of important pre-war relationships and quality of life. “Those who expelled”, then, were not only guilty of inflicting physical pain and causing material losses but also of shattering the social base. Thus, this category in informants’ critical narratives was not tied to ethnically defined “others” as one undifferentiated group.

It is hard to unearth the actual realities of pre-war heterogeneous relationships and general life prosperity stressed by the informants, even though peaceful multilayered coexistence across ethnonational and religious boundaries were documented as a lived reality. This reality was, however, also produced through the dynamics of an official ideology of “brotherhood and unity”, the sporadic stereotyping and stigmatisation of political opponents based on national–religious differences, and patchy micro-level politicisation of the Second World War and other historical atrocities and hostilities (Babić, 2004; Babić, 2006; Pratt, 2003). After all, informants’ evaluation of past experiences should be seen from their present positions. That does not mean that the representations thus created are inherently false but simply that the meaning of the past is influenced by present subjectivities, and contemporary narratives of the past are greatly concerned with sustaining those subjectivities, no matter how fluid they may be (Ganguly, 1992: 30). Therefore, this profound pre-war social entanglement and mutual attachment (Butler, 2004: 20), whether historically felt or presently constructed, can be seen as a discursive “social (re)mixing” which, alongside its sharp contrast with subsequent events, sets the atmosphere for self-positioning. Obrad’s determination to defend his ethno-religiously heterogeneous social networks – through some of which he and his family reached RC soon after the first hostilities in their Herzegovian city broke out – thus represents the process of constructing continual critically charged certainty across various contexts of systemic or individual social uncertainties and pressures. Furthermore, he was emphasising the preservation of close relationships with pre-war Muslim family friends from Herzegovina in the present, and recounting their shared insistence on adherence to this “traditional” closeness by frequent mutual visits, gatherings and observance of both orthodox Christian and Muslim holidays.

Newly established and cherished post-migration relationships with friends, neighbours, colleagues, or partners, usually characterised by participants as inter-ethnic and interreligious, became in many instances elements of ideologies of coexistence, beyond post-migration localities and nation-state boundaries, which further complicates the notion of “ethnic unmixing”. The discursive–practical sphere of Živana, who has been visiting her hometown in Dalmatia at least once a year for the past ten years, can serve as an example of the translocal character of the post-Yugoslav shared space of discourse, already implied in Obrad’s emphasis on shared experiences and aspirations across the post-Yugoslav state borders.

5 Serb proto-state existing within Croatia from 1991 to 1995 without international recognition.

I don't hate anybody, I hate only *inhumane* people, even if it's my own brother. Be *human*! I went to a high school in Zadar. Those troublemakers from my town, apparently "big Serbs", they *fought* with boys from Zadar and whatnot. I have never expressed who and what I am. Why would I?! Well, those troublemakers did! My best friends were my neighbours, Croatian girls, *both of them*. There were also Serbian girls. *Nobody asked you* in the past who you are or what you are, but we had a great time hanging out together, going for a *walk, dancing...* it was beautiful. And now, ah, "they are Croats, they are Serbs". What does it matter, man?! Everything is from war conflicts. The war is entirely to blame. If there had been no war, nobody would have minded who is on which side anymore. I said to my son when we were in our hometown in Croatia now, and to that little Bosnian, that here in Vojvodina, there are like 27 nations, so we all live next to each other. But we Serbs, Croats, we couldn't. It's politics again, *politicians*. Someone is benefiting from this war. (Živana, 67)

Besides summer relaxation at the seashore with her son and grandchildren, about which she narrated with dedication, vacations in Dalmatia represented a ground for dealing with the uncertainties of coexistence and interdependence as well. Wrapped up around a notion of "humanness", Živana's narrative transcends clear and essentialised divisions into national blocks, which enables her to (re)create a space actually or potentially shared with others identified by their "human" value, that is, in the context of post-Yugoslav sensemaking with those reciprocally defying ethnonational boundaries and engaging in coexistent relationships. The "lecture" she gave to her son and a tenant in their Dalmatian family house addresses the "normalcy" of coexistence and simultaneously its uncertainty and vulnerability, considering both past and present hostile nationalist threats and actions. Vojvodina is also taken as a model of inter-ethnic entanglement, representing a possible deprecariational element connecting personal and wider social experiences diachronically and synchronically.

Verica (62), a vendor at the local marketplace where Živana also worked, talked about similar experiences in her former Bosnian hometown during annual summer gatherings dedicated to *slava* – the village's celebration of its patron saint. She described these events as a cheerful feast permeated with music and dancing, bringing together both former and current villagers, mostly orthodox Serbs but Muslims as well, many of whom are "scattered across" the post-Yugoslav countries or (Western) Europe. Verica particularly emphasised another important aspect – nostalgic conversations about close relationships in Yugoslav times and the tragedy of their absence in the present, except during these gatherings and via online connections.

Veljko (67), who now lives in a village adjacent to RC, also reflected heavily on his Bosnian home city, frequently lamenting its "lost soul" due to war-torn relations and subsequent general individualisation, as well as "negative" urban spatial changes

during the post-Yugoslav transformations. He keeps in touch with a close pre-war Muslim friend who emigrated to England. Their friendship encompasses shared ideas about the idealised interdependent but freer past and criticism of current hatred-woven political atmosphere in the post-Yugoslav territories, along with their occasional visits to their mutual hometown. For Veljko, this friendship acts as a thread of certainty – maintaining it mitigates his sense of social loss but simultaneously reproduces it by a strong critical attitude flowing through the post-Yugoslav shared space of discourse.

Transnational practices and relations – indicated by frequent vacations to informants' birthplaces in Croatia or Bosnia and Herzegovina, an extended field of consumption, and actual or narratively remembered close transborder relationships – are therefore an important aspect of this sphere. These transnational practices and relations are sometimes crucially interconnected with “ideologies” of transborder social relations and in conflict with formal political discourses, such as Serbian president Vučić's public criticism of all “Serbs” taking a vacation in Croatia in the context of the annual commemoration of victims of the Croatian military's Operation Storm in August 1995. However, since the research was not transnational in a physical sense, I am constrained to discussing these practices primarily as a part of discourses, so as discourses of practices rather than “discursive practices” (Jansen, 2005: 26).

The other part of the bipolar migration model, “ethnic affinity”, also emerges as ethnographically problematic because it obscures processes of precarisation flowing from co-ethnic dynamics. And “those who welcomed” from the initial triad sarcastically implies its ambiguity. Narratives about the post-migration building of social webs, permeated significantly with instances of prejudice, lack of understanding, and verbal or physical abuse by locals categorised as “Serbs”, can be also seen through wider lenses represented by the post-Yugoslav shared space of discourse, despite their apparent practical confinement within “the Serbian society”. The following personal story about forced post-migration conscription recounted by Bojan (70) – who alongside his wife, daughter, and mother fled to Vojvodina from Kordun in Croatia as a part of the “refugee column” during Operation Storm – can illustrate this issue. It can be understood as an aspect of general wartime political tensions and aspirations of the Serbian authorities, headed by President Milošević. These manifested in Vojvodina through the curtailment of its autonomy and relative aggravation of inter-ethnic coexistence, along with a rise in nationalist discourses and the abuse and conscription of national minorities, leading to heightened emigration, mostly of Croats (Čapo Žmegač, 2007) but also of other minorities, e.g. Hungarians and Slovaks (Marušiać, Zlatanović, 2020: 147–148; Petsinis, 2020: 126–127).

And we refugees were getting to know each other, from Banija, Kordun, Lika, Dalmatia, *Bosnia*, from all parts of the former Yugoslavia, we were going to all the villages and towns. And after a month and a half there was another mobilisation, which hit me very hard. Yes, I had to come here to the commissariat and Red Cross

to register, I gave them information about where I settled, and that's how those data were obtained, and then we were illegally mobilised. It was Arkan's unit, they took us by a *ruse*, we hadn't recovered from all that before yet. They told us we were to sort out military duty here in the registry at the military department. However, it was not like that, they took us on a bus – it was full – and from there we left, to Erdut. There was an assembly centre from which I was assigned to the unit; my brother and I were mobilised together. ... They lined us up and he was the one from his unit who was taken away. I don't even know where they took him. I stayed. Yes, there was bullying, "You betrayed Krajina", and so on, it was sad, tragic. *Shaving our heads*, those were difficult situations. And from there I went to Vukovar. Some went to Bosnia. We scattered everywhere as they assigned us. ... They didn't let me go from that unit for 67 days. There were no actions. And then after 67 days I got a pass to visit my family. Once I got my pass, I never returned. Of course, I couldn't wait to leave. It was from one tragedy into another tragedy for many of us. There are certainly those data, I think somewhere they recorded who suffered, perished, all kinds of things happened there. And the biggest tragedy was that you stand in a unit, and you hear "you betrayed Krajina". But you spent four years in the war. You stayed by the hearth for four years, and then in the end someone tells you something like this. That was hard for us, all of us. (Bojan, 70)

Bojan's case may be specific in the sense that he was the only informant who directly experienced post-migration mobilisation – or wanted to mention it, at least. Nevertheless, from a broader perspective, his overall experience was not isolated. Examples of forced conscriptions of refugees were also present in other informants' stories concerning their relatives, acquaintances, or general cases as a part of narratives deconstructing national war politics. The estimated number of individuals mobilised in mid-1995 by the military police of Krajina (supported by the Serbian police) varies from 6,000 to 25,000 (Radović, 2006: 36). The context of these events was the military decline of the Republic of Serbian Krajina following operations by the Croatian army and police in 1995 – Operation Flash in May and Operation Storm in August – as well as the general "mobilisation crisis" in Serbia (Radović, 2006: 13). Individuals who were in any way connected to Krajina – even students and economic migrants from Krajina who had moved to Serbia before the war – were targeted under the pretext of "checking illegal refugees" (Radović, 2006: 22–26). Bojan was caught up in the second wave of mobilisation, characterised above all by the coordinated military police transportation of subjects to assembly centres in eastern Croatia that were operated by Arkan's paramilitary Serbian Volunteer Guard (Radović, 2006: 30–32).

Forced conscription, in Bojan's case, can be seen as an event which obstructed his personal process of deprecarisation. This mainly involved his psychophysical recovery from the war, accompanied by activities aimed at building an association to connect

individuals in Banat who had experienced refugeehood, in order to facilitate their collective materialisation of rights and their attempts to build networks with the “locals”. Simultaneously, elements shifting described relations to a wider sphere loom. Military conscription itself, but also the practices of physical and verbal abuse toward conscripts, are not just another tool of “intra-ethnic” control – they rely on reference points experientially shared by conscripts, namely, their prior war experiences within post-Yugoslav conflicts and alleged betrayal of Krajina and Serbia, which are used to imply their false “Serbian-ness”. And vice versa, in his narratives, Bojan – as well as other informants – also questioned “purity” of his conscriptors and other Serbian political actors who had broken their promises about the protection of Serbs in Yugoslav regions outside Serbia and were consequently regarded as “instigators of war”. In other words, the described conflicts can be defined as moralising dialogical arguments of identity (Werbner, 2019: 120), which in this case consist of mutually defining personal roles and value within the post-Yugoslav transformation.

The “process of regaining control” within seemingly inescapable constraints of conditions surrounding refugeehood (Korac, 2009: 7) – practically–discursively manifested, for instance, in Bojan’s desertion from a military camp – could also be assigned to the post-Yugoslav shared space of discourse as an instrument for social evaluation and for making sense of personal and collective transformations, positions, aspirations, and interests. Bojan’s story, narrated to me and a commissariat representative, was a part of his wider experiential and ideational field in which he positioned himself in terms of continual “humanness”, taken as a main form of identificational shift concerning the expression of co-existential tolerance. This is also ascribed to other “post-Yugoslavs” who reject the nationalist worldview – as seen in Živana’s case. Even though – according to his narratives – he has always maintained a “humane” mode of acting and thinking, especially during the war, and afterwards put a great effort into reconciliation of transborder relations (by organising cultural events in his hometown in Croatia through the refugee alliance to connect primarily children of “all nationalities”), Bojan simultaneously sees his situation as precarious. Specifically, he stated that “there is always a possibility that someone falsely testifies against me” concerning his participation in the war. Consequently, again, the post-Yugoslav shared space of discourse, by highlighting general mutual “humanness” as an actuality or ideal, mitigates this uncertainty which, however, cannot perish and rests on wartime experiences with torn interdependencies and post-war streams of political accusations.

The Social-economic Dimension of (De)precarisation

In the previous section, we examined (de)precarisation processes which permeate migration experiences through the lenses of the post-Yugoslav shared space of discourse. The examples analysed thus far have been centred on the shifting

identificational axes of social relationships, coexistence and conflicts which were mainly ethnically framed. However, the “material sphere and economic issues also have a significant role in the precarisation–deprecarisation nexus in informants’ narratives, albeit intertwined with other dimensions of life. I will continue with Bojan’s case and his description of the precarising circumstances surrounding his emigration.

It was hard for me to leave my job. After all, I’d been there for like 21 years, it was the *hardest* thing for me, almost harder than leaving the house. But *really*, I was so serious, responsible at work, *satisfied* at work, I achieved good results, I was respected, *valued*. So it was very difficult for me, and she [the head of the department] even suggested to me, “I know everything, I know what kind of person you are, but make up your own mind, I don’t want to tell you to stay or leave.” And *despite everything*, some barricades were already set up, I travelled. For a while I travelled home to the village and back, because my daughter was one year old, and I said to my wife, “Go there with the child to the countryside and I will work”, you know. (Bojan, 70)

Bojan belongs to the majority of informants who were in their thirties and forties during the war, and whose narratives about refugeehood are linked through an emphasis on material losses (in some cases total loss) in the form of damaged, looted, or burnt houses; destroyed cars; dead farm animals and devastated crops; or simply abandonment of possessions in a hurried escape. Bojan’s agricultural estate underwent the same fate, as he lamented during the interview. However, his sorrow was more tied to the pre-war industrial managerial position that he had to abandon in the end due to the atmosphere of ethnically charged political pressures and subsequent military mobilisation. Nevertheless, he made sure to accentuate his struggle against his precarised everyday conditions. His workplace was, in a sense, a microcosm of Yugoslavia – interdependence transformed “overnight” into an ethno-religiously defined battlefield. Furthermore, these processes represented a collapse of the image of a meaningful life, in this case manifested through the loss of the product of lifelong dedication and social recognition at the workplace, but also of the important relationships which defined pre-war everyday life for him and many other research participants.

Ljupka (39), who fled to RC as a child with her parents and siblings from Herzegovina in the summer of 1992, after initially spending few months hiding in the family’s weekend house outside the city, described their experience as a process “when life starts twice”. The stable pre-war urban life built by her parents – which, in addition to a secure family, had consisted of administrative and managerial professions, friendships and work networks, permanently secured housing in an intergenerational family house in the city centre that Ljupka’s mother inherited, and the availability of extensive material and social infrastructure – was abruptly deconstructed.

Živana, on the other hand, frequently talked nostalgically during our meetings at the marketplace about her employment at a factory before its closure after the first gunfire where she had felt a social closeness and security – thereafter she entered “grey economy”, which could only provide her with uncertain financial means.

Research participants were mainly supported by relatives or pre-war friends living in RC or other parts of Vojvodina or Serbia upon their migration, even though these networks, as well as institutional support, were limited due to economic crisis accompanying the war (Petsinis, 2020: 114–115) and even preceding it through a struggle over liberal economic reforms (Lazić, Sekelj, 1997). These precarious conditions, while playing a significant part in their narratives, were always confronted with “processes of regaining control” (Korac, 2009: 7), characterised by strongly emphasised personal or collective diligence, which was usually a tool for making sense of a new socioeconomic position described by many informants in terms of profound degradation. Bojan and Obrad narrated their “successful paths” of private entrepreneurship which, however, began with physical day labour and the “grey economy”. After a period of unemployment, Ljupka’s mother started working as a shop assistant with an irregular salary, while her father, after the bankruptcy of the company where he briefly worked as an administrator, worked for one year as a construction worker in Slovenia before getting another job in administration. For Ljupka, in addition to the school environment, the organisation of family life also changed. As the eldest child, she took on the role of caregiver to her siblings, as their parents were preoccupied by the challenges of resettling the family and reducing the material and economic precarisation of their new circumstances.

Ljupka’s father’s choice to undertake a brief transnational economic migration was shared by some other informants, typically among those from Croatia with dual citizenship, as this facilitated working in other post-Yugoslav or European countries. This is a frequent phenomenon, noted also by Leutloff-Grandits (2010: 20) in the context of processes of “(re-)integration” of Serbian refugees and their relations with places in Croatia that they abandoned. After the relative stabilisation of post-Yugoslav relations in 1997, many refugees were able to return to their pre-war homes, providing them with an opportunity to visit relatives and acquaintances who never left Croatia and to participate in public events and celebrations, which could lead to the reconciliation of inter-ethnic and emotional tension and, consequently, even to a permanent return to their pre-war place of residence (Leutloff-Grandits, 2010: 19–20). Furthermore, I should add that in my informants’ narratives these transnational experiences – together with pre-war translocal experiences under various social-economic models – frequently served as a base for evaluating local realities, especially in comparison with other post-Yugoslav territories. For example, Anica (54), who migrated to a village near RC from eastern Croatia with her husband and children, has a permanent residence in that village, but has been occasionally working as an *au pair* in Germany and Austria for more than 15 years. Besides criticising how the current rise of nationalism in Serbia and the region is obstructing peaceful coexistence, she also led a hypothetical argument with

Serbian political leaders whom she accused of degrading the system of social support in comparison with her experiences from Germany, Austria and Croatia.

Informants' efforts towards deprecarisation can be also seen within the realm of post-migration "intra-ethnic" dynamics, usually permeated with identificational conflicts that ultimately open the post-Yugoslav shared space of discourse. The following story from Ljupka's about a conflict situation she experienced while dining in a restaurant with her colleagues and an acquaintance of one of them (the subject of this anecdote), a few days before our interview, is a typical representation of informants' narratives on this issue.

Two or three days ago, I was in a situation, we were sitting in a restaurant. So, I'm sitting in a restaurant and we're talking, and one person who I believe probably didn't mean to offend me, but it just came out of his mouth because he really means it, but maybe he didn't engage his brain fully, and if he did, he would keep his mouth shut, but he expressed it so carelessly. We were talking about who got apartments and so on. And he says: "For how long will those refugees from the '90s keep getting apartments?! Well, they've been here for 30 years, *they* have a lot more than some of us." And he *said it in front of me* and nothing. And I'm thinking, *should I* engage in a polemic with him or not?! *I don't* want to create a conflict because of some other people, but I felt the need to say to him: "And imagine how much more they would have had if there had been no war. If in addition to the war, when they lost everything, they *still* created *more* than some here. No matter how much those people were helped, they will never be fully compensated for what they lost. (Ljupka, 39)

Processes of deprecarisation involving the diligent improvement of material economic conditions and (re)building of a sense of life have been confronted with sporadically emerging tensions based on differing subjective views of the meaning of refugeehood and the experiences intertwined with it. The post-Yugoslav shared space of discourse is widened through actors' dialogical struggle to define and challenge their respective values while relying on broader post-Yugoslav references – a state of refugeehood caused by events outside Serbia, implying an experientially distant entity "unjustly" affecting local realities. Participants' disappointment over unfulfilled "intra-ethnic expectations" was, to a great extent, a result of these moralising economic conflicts, and eventually led to the construction by migrants of a sociocultural identificational narrative that accentuated the mutual profound differences between migrants and locals while bringing them closer to post-Yugoslav realities outside Serbia. Ultimate affirmation of personal and "categorical refugee" merits through these narrative conflicts endows informants' precarised deprecarisation with a new sense of certainty and continuity, albeit precarious again due to threats of potential conflicts (such as the one described by Ljupka) which could aggravate relationships formed in the post-migration period.

Cases of research participants' economic (de)precarisation thus cannot be subsumed under mere processes of material-economic base stabilisation, ideally in the form of full-time employment, which is already highly problematised as potentially insecure and exploitative (Millar, 2017: 6). Flexibilities, after all, can provide a base for socially and personally transformative practices (Neilson, Rossiter, 2006).

For example, Živana's "anchorage" at local marketplaces – where she has worked for nearly three decades and counting – has been permeated with concerns over the ambiguous legality of her business, conflicts with and fear of local police and inspection officers, confiscation of goods, time-consuming acquisition of merchandise, fluctuating working hours, day-to-day reliance on customer numbers, and uncertainty regarding the politics of the marketplace managers who define the conditions for renting stalls and general operations in the market. Speaking strictly of organisational power (Wolf, 1990: 586) over "marketplace life", Živana's prospects are quite limited and uncertain; she lacks control over the situation. However, in the context of her life more broadly, her reasons for not making plans to shift to "regular" full-time employment relate to her past and present obligations, initially as the sole caregiver for her children and, now, as a carer for her grandchildren. Flexible working hours, even at the expense of financial gain, enabled her to dedicate more time and care to her children and grandchildren and to react to various family emergencies more resiliently, helping her (re)produce a sense of greater control over everyday life and social commitments. Moreover, this has opened a space for easier cross-border visits to her birthplace and house, which she has been renting out – another benefit in the overall process of economic stabilisation. Not least, her explanation of the inadequacy of "regular" jobs rests to a great extent on comparisons with her past "Yugoslav" life when her workplace was a sphere of meaningful relationship-building, activities and services which also facilitated her life outside that arena.

Živana's marketplace experiences also emerged as a topic of conversation when I talked with her and Lola (68) in Lola's garden. Lola is an acquaintance of Živana's who also fled to Serbia in the "refugee column" from Croatia. My plan was to conduct an interview with Lola, and Živana accompanied me to her house in the adjacent neighbourhood. However, the visit turned into a completely informal story-sharing event, where I was an "attentive listener". One of Živana's stories was an expression of her frustration with relationships with other vendors, and especially with a vendor named Jovana, who sold right next to her. Besides a history of Jovana reporting her to the police under suspicion of illegally selling tobacco, instances of Jovana calling Živana "Ustasha"⁶ during frequent disputes hurt her the most – she was categorised as such based on the fact that she came from Croatia while actually she "was expelled

6 Ustasha (Ustaša, pl. Ustaše) was a designation for a member of the Croatian interwar and WWII fascist organisation of the same name and its military troops. It resurged during the (post-)Yugoslav wars and has been used in Serbian nationalist discourses as a pejorative term applied to all alleged members of the Croatian nation.

by those Ustashes". Živana explained that she would not mind if Jovana referred to her as Croat, but the former term has much deeper accusatory and "othering" connotations. Lola immediately recollected similar disputes that she experienced approximately 15 years ago at a local stadium where she had lived as a maintenance worker for almost twenty years together with her husband. According to her story, they were frequently provoked by a gang of local teenagers, with instances of damage to property and verbal abuse. They were also occasionally visited by a group of policemen – one of them being the father of one of the boys. During one altercation concerning Lola's complaints about the boys' behaviour, the policemen accused them of being national traitors for not staying and fighting in the war, having initially falsely believed that they came from Kosovo, which led to a tense dispute over their actual war experiences. Lola emphasised that in the end she took a control of the situation "as a boss in the house and stadium" and drove the policemen away. Živana and Lola, through subsequent conversation, concluded that the "locals" have never been understanding of their plight and frequently hindered their efforts to build a new economic and social base, while "refugees" and people from their former regions were described in completely opposite ways, in terms of their "superior" sociality and work ethic. Thus, the informants' narratives on social-economic issues provided affirmation of their personal and collective paths as "refugees", through the experiential references within the post-Yugoslav shared space of discourse – in this case materialised in Lola's garden.

Conclusions

The lives and narratives of the research participants – specifically the forced migrants from the (post-)Yugoslav wars living in a regional city in Banat, Vojvodina – could be analytically (re)told in countless directions and forms. On the preceding pages, despite being unable to devote space to every single story or event recorded in the field, I have attempted to elucidate relations between experiences of forced migration and (de)precarisation. Seeing this process as unbounded (Ettlinger, 2007) and anchored in uncertain interdependencies (Butler, 2004), I have outlined heterogeneous socialities, micropolitics, and social-economic (dis)continuities as important spheres in which the efforts of informants, acting as "social evaluators" to create a more certain or controllable environment, emerge. Apparently, war-driven migration to Serbia, as an "ethnic homeland", from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina can be seen as a means of existential deprecarisation, in that involved leaving a social environment deeply affected by ethnically and/or religiously rationalised violence. At the same time, the events surrounding migration represent the rending of important pre-war relations and values that transcended clear-cut ethno-religious boundaries. Participants' narratives in this sense indicate the triggering of new post-migration precarisation dynamics revolving around co-ethnic conflicts,

uncertain economic prospects, and a shaken sense of life trajectories. Simultaneously, this precarised atmosphere in their stories is consistently challenged by informants emphasising their continuous efforts and aspirations to transform their realities, which are not linear but frequently confronted with constraints and uncertainties.

My presentation of (de)precarisational processes was guided by an analytical frame that I termed the “post-Yugoslav shared space of discourse”. On the one hand, this construct can be seen as a broader etic perspective which aims to overcome methodological nationalism by situating informants within wider webs that transcend “Serbian space”. However, my findings suggest that this construct can be postulated as a part of narrated experiences and as a frame of emic interpretations in the context of uncertain post-migration realities. As a means of informants’ social evaluation, it can be seen as a dynamic sphere capturing arguments which problematise post-migration realities and identificationally situate themselves within relations that oppose strict boundaries (mainly ethno-religious) by highlighting the dialectics between valuable inter-ethnic coexistence and conflictual intra-ethnic relationships. Interdependencies, described in terms of peaceful and prosperous coexistence, were afterwards precarised by war which defined them in terms of hostile incompatibility. Co-ethnic disappointment, in connection with newly formed post-migration relationships narratively again characterised by coexistence overstepping neat ethnic and/or religious categories, opened up a space for the critical reassessment and de-essentialisation of war and refugeehood. By positioning themselves and others from pre-migration localities – considered as ready to reciprocate tolerance – in terms of “humanness” instead of essentialised national(ist) categories, deprecarisation of torn interdependencies was enabled. Informants’ narratives of economic conflicts with “co-ethnic members” of the local population, operating with moralising arguments with references to values and qualities from informants’ extended experiential fields encompassing their past and/or present translocalities, also indicate shifts from ethnic- or religious-based identifications to those stemming from shared experiences of “refugeehood”. New transnational experiences within post-Yugoslav territories and the maintenance (or re-establishment) of some important transborder relationships did also support the widening of the post-Yugoslav discursive sphere. However, by bringing informants’ attention and aspirations closer to transnational interdependencies, this widened space can also (re)produce uncertainties stemming from past experiences of vulnerability and current political tensions – thus perpetuating the (de)precarisational dynamic.

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