

Roma, statelessness and Yugo-nostalgia

By *Nando Sigona*

I have known A. for fifteen years, but only visited him at home for the first time in April 2005, in a nomad camp in Florence. His home was made up of two caravans and an old van, which he shared with his wife, three sons, a daughter, a daughter-in-law and three grandchildren. To join together the two caravans there was a tin-roofed patio. It is in this area that, especially during spring and summer, the family used to have meals and welcome guests.

When I arrived, A. kindly invited me to sit at the long table outside. His wife B. was kneading bread dough at the other end of the table with the help of her daughter-in-law. She briefly interrupted her work to serve us some tea and coffee. Before starting our conversation, A. apologised for the condition of the camp. It was my first time there and he wanted to make sure that I knew that this was not the kind of place he would like to live in, and that the camp was very different from their home back in Kosovo. He also wanted to show me something. I followed him inside one of the caravans. There was hardly space to step inside. The caravan was completely packed with papers, books, memorabilia from Yugoslavia and old and new photos. ‘This is my library’, he said with pride. We went back to our chairs; he had taken a folder from the library which he opened on the table. It was filled with newspaper articles, leaflets, and photos taken at demonstrations in Florence and of their home town, Mitrovica. One of the photos showed their family home, which was bombarded and looted during the 1999 Kosovo war. However, the centrepiece of the folder – at least with respect to the story I am going to tell here – was the cover page of an old issue of the weekly *Paris Match*. On the cover



A photo of Marshal Tito in the Oلماتello camp, Florence, 2005.

©Nando Sigona

there was a family portrait of Marshal Tito (1892–1980) and his wife sitting on a bench. A. commented:

When Tito was in power, our life in Yugoslavia was by far better. Now we do not dare to go back to Kosovo; it is extremely dangerous for us. Here at least we can survive.

This conversation and the striking contrast between the living conditions in the camp, Italian dominant discourse on Roma as stateless and nomadic, and the quest for dignity and respect exuding from the pile of letters, articles, and photos clustered in the derelict caravan prompted me to delve into the history of Yugoslavia and Kosovo, and to visit the villages and towns of some of my research participants.

In 2008, a few months after Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence, I went to Kosovo to carry out fieldwork on the integration strategy for Roma and the role of Roma leadership in the transition to the new independent state (Sigona 2009, 2012). During my field research, I visited Roma settlements in southern Serbian enclaves, an Internationally Displaced Persons (IDP) camp and the Roma neighbourhood (*mahala*) in Mitrovica in the north where Serbia retained *de facto* control of the territory, and urban areas where the Roma lived in closer proximity to the Albanian speaking majority.

Romani people have lived in Kosovo for centuries. Since the nineteenth century, as a result of the process of dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, they have been under pressure to assimilate and align themselves to one or other of the main ethnic groups laying nationalist claims to the territory.

Compressed between two parallel social and political systems, Romani communities adapted and adjusted, developing various, and sometimes diverging, strategies of survival. Rather than looking at the 1999 war in isolation, when '[Roma] loyalty was bid over in a conflict which tolerated no neutrality' and '[Roma] were forced to choose a side in a conflict in which there was no Romani side' (Cahn and Peric 1999: 6), I saw the war and its consequences as part of a continuum in which periods of ethnic tensions and conflicts have been intercalated with periods of relative peace and cooperation.

This historical periodisation was present in the narratives of my informants. They often nostalgically evoked pre-Milošević era as a time of cultural, social and economic development for Romani communities. The death of Tito marks a crucial transition towards the polarisation of ethnic relations in former Yugoslavia and the surge of different nationalisms that gradually transformed the political power structure and as a result also everyday relationships between ethnic groups.



Two photos of Marshal Tito in Leposavic IDP camp, Kosovo, 2008.

©Nando Sigona

And the present, instead, is the era of international human rights but also of the arrival of foreign consultants and experts bringing their ‘pre-cooked recipes’, as one of them said, for Kosovo’s problems.

We sat in the common room of the Leposavic IDP camp, a room furnished with a few computers and a long table. The walls were decorated with a few photos, including two old portraits of Marshal Tito in white navy uniform and in plainclothes. D. spoke while peering at a leaflet he was preparing for a public event:

I like the Socialist era because it was a time when everyone was equal and had equal rights and you didn’t think much about differences.

The memory of Tito’s Yugoslavia is very much alive in Yugoslav Roma’s accounts, in Kosovo and in Italy alike. Many recall the contribution that members of their enlarged families made to the partisan victory over Nazis, a contribution that was publicly celebrated by the new Yugoslav republic born in 1945. In the 1950s, Romani activists became more and more involved in the ranks of the Communist Party. Cultural initiatives and associations flourished,

and a monthly newspaper in Romani language (Romano Lil) was established in Belgrade.

In 1974, the project of creating a common pan-Yugoslav identity that had guided identity politics for two decades was abandoned, and a more confederative state based on an ideology of national communism was established. The growing nationalisation of the federal system initiated in the mid-1960s crystallised in the 1974 Constitution, transforming the republican units and provinces into basic actors of the system.

An important corollary of this process was that the Roma were officially recognised as ‘ethnic group’ now that the ‘Yugoslav identity’ no longer existed as a communal political identity. This recognition in the 1974 Constitution marked an important departure for the Roma, who became assimilated into the ‘ethnic quota’ system governing access to key public resources and jobs. Importantly, too, they became officially recognised as peers among the kaleidoscope of Yugoslavian communities.

However, the mechanism designed by the new Constitution began to crack after the death of Marshal Tito in 1980. Without the unifying charisma of the founding father of Yugoslavia, the country was left under the control of the republican and provincial communist elites. In the process, the Roma were caught between conflicting national projects, and left socially and economically excluded.

A’s nostalgic reclaiming of Tito is crucial to his sense of belonging in Italy where he sees the history of his family and of many Roma refugees erased by Italian hegemonic discourse on the Roma as stateless and nomadic, with no roots other than some abstract and distant Indian ancestry, and to Roma IDPs in new post-Yugoslav states who battle for preserving a meaningful and politically viable presence for them there. □

References

- Cahn, C. and Peric, T. (1999) 'Roma and the Kosovo conflict', *Roma Rights* 2:6–21.
- Sigona, N. (2009) 'Being Roma activists in post-independence Kosovo'. In: Sigona, N. and Trehan, N. (eds.) *Romani Politics in Contemporary Europe: Poverty, Ethnic Mobilization and the Neoliberal Order*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, pp. 209–25.
- Sigona, N. (2012) 'Between competing imaginaries of statehood Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian (RAE) Leadership in Newly Independent Kosovo', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 38(8): 1213–1232.