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Subverting Borders

Doing Research on Smuggling
and Small-Scale Trade

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Šverc and the *Šinobus*: Small-scale smuggling in Vojvodina

Rory Archer and Krisztina Rácz

1   Introduction

The flat lands of Vojvodina, the northern province of Serbia, are the preserve of the *šinobus*, a metal railcar resembling a bus on wheels. The *šinobus* travels on decaying single rail tracks and is usually unfeasibly slow, bouncing through cornfields from town to village to town. When the train tracks run parallel to a road, as they do between Subotica in Serbia and the Hungarian border, the cars appear to race by at breakneck speed. They mostly travel under the 80 km per hour speed limit but the *šinobus* reaches peak speeds of 30 km per hour on this line. Passengers may notice this as the speedometer is visible to those sitting in the front seats behind the driver. The atmosphere in the *šinobus* reflects its leisurely speed – sitting close together in a small, enclosed environment passengers tend to interact more than on Vojvodina's far more comprehensive bus network or faster inter-city trains.

The *šinobus* (Hungarian *sinbusz*) is a colloquial term for the class 812 railcar made in the Goša factory in Smederevska Palanka, Serbia since 1958. An ancestor of the German Dmot railcar Class 126, acquired by the Socialist Federal Republic Yugoslavia in lieu of post World War II war reparations, it was used on smaller non-electrified branch lines in Yugoslavia.[14] The service has been reduced in recent decades and most of the remaining routes are in Vojvodina. Two routes traverse the Serbian border to Jimoblia in Romania and Szeged in Hungary. Such journeys have a strong multilingual and multinational character. They are associated with (often grey or illicit) transborder activity at a local level and they form our entry point for the exploration of such phenomena.

We explore the continuing changes since the 1980s in illicit cross-border trade (i.e. largely unsanctioned transnational activity) to and from North-eastern Serbia to Romania and Hungary through the Vojvodina region, an area trisected by Serbian, Romanian and Hungarian state borders and linked by *šinobus* routes. Our focus is primarily on the embedded socio-cultural nature of the illicit trade – how it is experienced and represented at the micro-level. Investigating how narratives of the economic 'golden age' of Serbia (as a component of socialist

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14   See http://sinobus.webs.com/infohistory.htm (last access: 20.05.2011).

Yugoslavia) are pitted against the socially and economically challenging period of the 1990s and the current ambiguous stage of European integration, one should gain insight into the strategies that are put to work to position oneself individually and collectively in the border region – meaning not only the state border but also the border between nations, social groups and between legal and illicit. The border region and smuggling are constitutive of the dynamism between the citizen and the authorities, the legal and illegal, sellers and buyers, Serbs and Romanians, Serbs and Hungarians. Exploring *šverc*[15] (petty smuggling) in Vojvodina by looking at how smuggling and the social interactions it involves are articulated also demonstrates how small-scale smuggling has created social networks leading to the accumulation of social capital and how, on the other hand, cultural capital is made use of in order to facilitate illegal trade and thus accumulate economic capital. The *šinobus,* a rail-car that crosses the borders in question represents a *lieu de mémoire* of small-scale smuggling and localised transborder activity and formed a key means of transport during our fieldwork.

On the basis of fieldwork conducted in the border region of Northeast Serbia, Western Romania and Southern Hungary in 2010 we explore narratives of Serbia as the exporter of economic, cultural and social commodities in the case of smuggling into Romania, and Serbia as dependent on another country's resources in the case of smuggling of household necessities and fuel from Hungary and Romania. Imagined hierarchies between the states involved in smuggling were inverted at different points in recent decades – since the 1980s ever-changing visa requirements and divergent economic conditions prompted various flows of grey economic and cultural activity across state borders. We demonstrate the fluidity and context dependent nature of illicit cross-border transactions between Serbia and Romania and Serbia and Hungary from the 1980s to the 2000s, depicting how the specific dynamic socio-economic and political conditions of the three states and the specific local dimensions of the Vojvodina border region contributed to the rise of informal cross-border (grey) economic activities. In addition to the economic rational of *šverc* we also explore the cultural legacy of these cross-border interactions and normative attitudes towards *šverc* that we encountered.

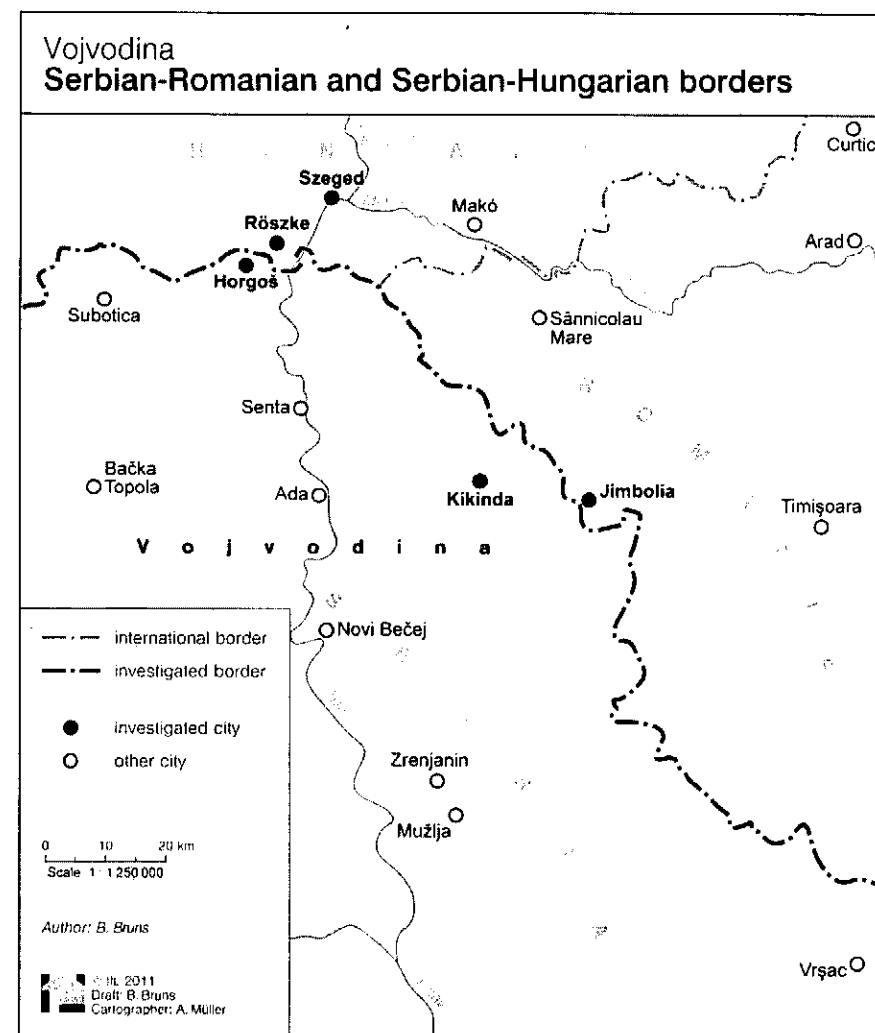15   The Serbian word for smuggling also used by local Hungarians, in Vojvodina.

Fig. 7: The Vojvodina region

2   Positioning the research

The term *šverc* originates from the German word *Schwarzhandel* (black market) and is used to describe the informal, open-market trade in contraband, cheap

commodities in Serbo-Croatian (see Jašarević 2007: 279). *Šverc* predates the wars and crises of the 1990s – during Tito's Yugoslavia massive amounts of commodities were smuggled in and out of the country and sold at markets. In Serbia of the 1990s war and sanctions changed the role of *šverc* – smuggling was encouraged by the regime fostering what Andreas (2005: 337) terms an "uncivil society – reflected in a higher level of public tolerance for lawbreaking and an undermined respect for the rule of law". Smuggling became not only to be perceived by many as socially acceptable rather than deviant, but even celebrated as patriotic (see ibid: 337-341; see also Antonić 2002).

After the collapse of Yugoslavia, Vojvodina, like the rest of the former state, was faced with severe socio-economic depression and high unemployment rates – a result of the economic crisis that had begun in the 1980s, the warmongering policy of the Milošević regime and the international sanctions that had been imposed on Serbia/Yugoslavia since 1991 (see Judah 2000; Thomas 1998; Ramet/Pavlaković 2005). These factors contributed to smuggling ('sanctions busting') becoming an important factor of economic survival. Indeed the Milošević government deliberately fostered black markets and smuggling networks as a means to prevent social unrest (see Dimitrijević/Pejić 1993; Dinkić 1995: 229). In the Balkan context transnationalism in the 1990s has come to refer to foreign interventions or organised crime, a particular concern of the 'international community' actors (see Hožić 2008). Phenomena like small-scale smuggling are thus articulated as problems that require a firmer establishment of legal authority rather than accepted as a logical consequence of post-socialist socio-economic precariousness. Perhaps the most notable example of *šverc* for certain international actors in former Yugoslavia is the 'Arizona' marketplace in Bosnia and Herzegovina which has been fostered and represented by such actors as a means to encourage inter-ethnic cooperation in Bosnia (see ibid.; also Jašarević 2007). Ethnographic research by Jašarević however suggests that "[w]hat is at stake at Arizona is not primarily a negotiation of (multi)ethnicity" but rather the "differentiation between subsistence and an unchecked accumulation of profit" (2007: 275).

The case of small-scale smuggling in Vojvodina, as in the rest of former Yugoslavia calls for a broader contextualisation in the social sphere. As *šverc* is largely particular to border areas, only by understanding the characteristics of these regions is it possible to account for the dynamism between states, nations, and the border, and the role of *šverc* and the actors engaged in it. As Wilson and Donnan (1998) argue in their work on border identities, borders are cultural constructs that give meaning to the boundaries between nations. States control border areas as their first lines of defence, but informal networks at the border areas often compete with the state power, therefore border areas cannot be

considered as mere extensions of the state. All the more as people may construct their identities differently at the border regions than they do elsewhere in the state often being connected to the other side of the border by ties of ethno-national unity (see ibid.). Various practices such as smuggling can thus be seen as a way to undermine the efforts of the state to control identities of the people in the border areas. By studying the border area, it is possible to simultaneously explore the flexibility of people in border areas to adapt to culturally diverse environments, and the rigidity of states to ideologically control their cultural space (see ibid: 4). This is particularly resonant in liminal border areas of Vojvodina where there is no precise fit between nation and state; the border goes against the logic of supposed ethnic, linguistic and cultural homogeneity. Vojvodina offers an interesting case study for questions of diversity and ethnicity. Officially, more than 20 national minorities live alongside Serbs in Vojvodina; the most numerous being Hungarians, Roma, Romanians, Slovaks, Croats and Ruthenians (see Ilić 2001). Thus it is to be expected that such an area has a longstanding tradition of cross border and inter-ethnic networks. Stereotyped narratives of multicultural Vojvodina exist (see Korhec 2006; Devicé 2002) alongside evidence of strained ethnically framed cleavages (see Bieber/Winterhagen 2006).

Wilson and Donnan (1998, 1999) advocate for an anthropology of borders that integrates the study of visible and symbolic borders between states. Besides this distinction between the real and the imaginary border, they also maintain a clear-cut distinction between nations and states, a distinction that is the most visible in border regions (ibid. 1998: 2). Other works also emphasize the role of borders in ethno-national division, the fostering of conflict and inequalities (see Holly et.al. 2003; Meinhof 2003). Although our research looks at state borders as frontiers that exhibit political and social features (see Wilson/Donnan 1998: 5), instead of focusing on the separation and demarcation of separate states, cultures and peoples, we rather explore its characteristic to connect, to transport and to transform culture, and to create social ties between those on the "opposite sides" of it as well as imagined geographical hierarchies.

Serbian migration to Vojvodina has occurred in different waves (the most recent by Serbian war-time refugees in the 1990s) and in-group socio-cultural cleavages demonstrate that commonality and difference is not exclusively ethnically framed but can relate to the duration of residence in the region and alleged cultural and civilizing difference (see Živković 1997, 2001). A body of literature explores imagined geography and representations of Eastern Europe (see Wolff 1994) with a particular focus on the Balkan Peninsula from the perspective of the European problematising civilizing discourses (see Todorova 1997; Goldsworthy 1998; Bjelić/Savić 2002). Such representations have long

been internalised within the region (see Todorova 1997) conceived by Bakić Hayden (1995) as 'nesting orientalisms': patterns of perceived Europeanness vis-à-vis a less European internal or nearby other. Research by Jansen suggests that such representations can be enacted retrospectively in the Serbian context in which positive narratives of socialist Yugoslavia focus on the relative Westernness of Yugoslavia compared to other socialist states – "For them we were the West!" (2009: 828).

Differentiation between the in-group and the other (side of the border) has been a traditional means of identity creation and central feature in the construction of ethnicity (see Holly et.al. 2003). Neighbouring states and the status of their inhabitants are perceived as asymmetrical, and this inequality is expressed in the way people formulate their attitudes towards their neighbours. This imagined hierarchy is not stable, though: stereotypical views of the Other are often negotiated and conflicted, and expressed through various discursive strategies. At various times, under various conditions 'unequal' neighbours are seen differently (see Galasinska/Galasinski 2003; Meinhof/Galasinski 2002). Divergent economic circumstances, political affiliations and social conditions greatly contribute to how people in border areas refer to themselves, their neighbours, the border and their transborder experience.

In our research we use the concept of narratives to explain the way people in border areas construct their identities across the dimensions of time and space: the way they recreate their memories of the time when Serbia was the exporter of popular cultural goods versus when it was an importer of economic goods such as food, petrol, textiles etc. We understand narratives to be a repertoire of verbal instances through which people constitute themselves as parts of social networks, through which they create their identities in a social sphere (see Somers 1994). Narratives give the means to individuals to understand and make sense of the social world in which they live. This narrative constitution of identity is made possible by the characteristic features of narratives: they connect parts of a story into a chronological order, create causal relationships between the parts of a story, people appropriate narratives that they identify themselves with selectively and they provide events with a temporal and special dimension. Therefore people don't invent narratives on their own, but derive them from an already existing limited repertoire (see ibid.).

Two key methods were used in our field research, participant observation and informal semi-structured interviews – both classical ethnographical methods in the sense that we were concerned with the informants' interpretation of the theme of our study: grey cross-border activity. Having the *šinobus* as an introductory focus enabled us to make initial contact with informants more easily by forming a logical starting point to discuss sometimes delicate matters like

smuggling and other cross border dynamics, as a cognitive association exists between the *šinobus*, *šverc* and a regional sense of identification. In 2009 and 2010 we crossed the Serbian-Romanian and Serbian Hungarian borders by train, car, bus and on foot at several border crossings between Serbia and Romania and Serbia and Hungary. Our research in North-western Vojvodina focuses on two *šinobus* routes; from Kikinda (Serbia) to Jimbolia (Romania) and from Subotica and Horgoš (Serbia) to Röszke and Szeged (Hungary) and the surrounding road borders.[16]

Fig. 8: The *šinobus* at Subotica station

During our travels in the towns and villages in the border area we observed and interviewed local residents, passengers, traders, buyers, border guards, conductors and customs officials about travelling by *šinobus* and other means of

16   Kelebia (Serbia) – Tompa (Hungary), Horgoš (Serbia) – Röszke (Hungary), Kiszombor (Hungary) – Cenad (Romania), Srpska Crnja (Serbia) – Jimbolia (Romania), Vatin (Serbia) – Moraviţa (Romania)

transport, the border, the business across it, passenger traffic and the nature of smuggling and of smuggled goods. Research was conducted in Serbian, Hungarian and English. Naturally we are aware that this methodological approach has its limitations: the choice of informants is random, restricted to passengers and local people who happened to be in the vehicle or at a certain place at the same time as us. However, travelling with other passengers through the border also provided valuable sources of information as we could observe and to a certain extent participate in the activities that were the focus of our research. We assume that "experience (...) is always embedded in and occurs through narrative frames" (Olick/Robbins 1998:110), therefore the way for us to grasp the memories of small-scale trade in the last decades is through narratives and articulations of it. We drew upon these narratives in order to arrive at some conclusions about the nature of the grey trans-border practices, actors and its regional meaning. In addition to drawing upon secondary literature relating to smuggling and borders in general and the Vojvodina region we paid attention to newspaper sources to provide empirical weight to discussions and to familiarise ourselves with the localised media discourses in regard to smuggling.

3   Three decades of *šverc*: narratives of smuggling in Vojvodina from the 1980s to the 2000s

Yugoslavia as Romania's window to the west

At least since the emergence of market influences in the Romanian cultural sphere from 1978 (see Verdery 1995:96) the illicit consumption of Yugoslav cultural products has become a dominant practice in Timişoara and the surrounding region. As a result of this legacy, and the native 15,000 strong Serbian minority in Timişoara, Serbian popular culture remains visible (and audible) in the city. During our fieldwork visits to Romania respondents consistently mentioned Serbian music (in particular Lepa Brena, a pop-folk performer) and maintained that Romanians in the border region (the city of Timişoara and its environs) have been consuming Yugoslavian/Serbian mass cultural products since at least the 1980s, chiefly newly composed folk music[17] (henceforth NCFM) through illicitly accessing Serbian radio and television

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17   Newly composed folk music (Serbian: *novokomponovana narodna muzika*) was a style which developed from the 1960s in Yugoslavia merging folk styles from various regions of Yugoslavia and the wider Balkan region with modern music styles (rock, pop etc.). The 1990s variant is known as *turbofolk* or *neofolk* (see Vidić Rasmussen 1995, 2002).

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stations during the 1980s and later through the distribution of pirated music cassettes.

A Romanian student from the east of the country recalling a summer spent with an aunt in Banat in the early 1990s, remembers Serbian vendors selling pirated cassettes of Lepa Brena and other musicians and "Serbian grannies hawking *anti-bebi pilule*" (oral contraceptives) on the streets of Timişoara.[18] Serbian/Yugoslav mass culture like Lepa Brena had an edge over Romanian modern musical forms having developed in the image of Western performers with a strong Balkan vernacular under the comparative liberty of the Tito regime. In Romania (like Bulgaria) ethno-pop musical forms arose in tandem with glasnost and perestroika in the mid-1980s and signified "an emergent sense of regional Balkan consciousness within the European continent" (Buchanan 2002: 4f.). "This musical style became an icon of the possibilities of personal freedom and expression within a totalitarian regime and a harbinger of the political changes to come" (Rice 2002: 27; see also Buchanan 1996). Đorđe Matić, writing of Lepa Brena's performances in 1980s in neighbouring Romania and Bulgaria in front of 100,000 person crowds noted the enthusiasm of the audience as Brena sung *Živjela Jugoslavija* ('Long Live Yugoslavia' – an ode to Tito's Yugoslavia):

> "We all got the message from the television, without words, that slaves in the neighbouring darkness experienced our country as freedom, and Tito's name as its symbol. Without force, without anyone having to suggest it, they simply thought so. A few years ago I saw the same footage again – it is still one of the most fascinating things I have ever seen." (2004: 226)

Serbian NCFM began to 'sneak' into Romanian Banat from Yugoslavia as Serbian musicians performed at weddings and their music was circulated through pirated cassettes (see Beissinger 2008:106). In the border zone Romanians were able to tune into Serbian television and radio which disseminated pop-folk styles. NCFM was not aired on Romanian media nor officially sold. Timişoara became a centre for the unauthorised production of a Romanian variant of NCFM with a Romani imprint that became known as *muzică sîrbească* (Serbian music) which from the perspective of the communist government violated the model of a homogenous Romanian national culture requiring measures to eradicate it (ibid.: 107). Despite official bans on Balkan ethno-pop in Romania during communism and widespread disapproval of the post-Ceausescu phenomenon of *muzică orientală* these music styles have thrived (see Voiculescu 2005).

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18   Personal correspondence with authors, February 2010.

Fig. 9:   The 'Lepa Brena Pizzeria'

As well as the legacy evident in *muzică orientală*, physical reminders of Yugoslav/Serbian cultural influences are manifest in the city. Timișoara boasts a 'Lepa Brena Pizzeria', 'Restaurant Yugoslavia', 'Restaurant Karađorđe' and 'Restaurant Pljevlja'[19]. The 'Lepa Brena Pizzeria', a bold four-storey edifice in the eastern periphery of the city decorated in pictures from the Yugoslav performer's 1980s heyday boasts three kinds of pizza in honour of the folk music queen and regularly hosts live Serbian and Romanian pop-folk acts. The upmarket 'Restaurant Karađorđe' in the city centre, named after the leader of the first Serbian national uprising, adheres to specifically Serbian culinary traditions while 'Restaurant Yugoslavia' falls into a Yugo-nostalgic category (similar to Tito-themed establishments in former Yugoslavia [see Velikonja 2009]) with various Tito-themed memorabilia celebrating the former republic. Upon our arrival in 'Restaurant Yugoslavia' a christening party was in full swing taking over most of the restaurant. The waitress apologetically explained in Serbian "we

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19   Plevlja is a town in Montenegro.

usually only play Serbian music but because of this christening party we are playing some Romanian [*manele*[20]] tonight".

'Sanctions busting': Serbia as an illicit importer

The end of the socialist regime in surrounding states and the international embargo of the 1990s suddenly changed the notion of Serbia/Yugoslavia as a regional hegemon in terms of cultural commodities – it became dependent upon *šverc* goods from neighbouring Romania and Hungary. The shortage of basic household goods, petrol, tobacco and textiles, led to the development of extensive and specialised trading networks across the borders. In the case of both Romania and Hungary, petrol is the most widely remembered item that was smuggled to Serbia, like the *šinobus*, fuel smuggling became emblematic of the era of the sanctions. Although Serbia was relatively self-sufficient in food as an agricultural country (particularly the fertile Vojvodina region) the state relied heavily upon fuel imports.

As for small-scale smuggling between Serbia and Hungary, the usual pattern was the following: smuggling alcohol and cigarettes to Hungary from Serbia, where they were cheaper, and selling Hungarian petrol in Serbia, where it lacked. Smugglers were both Serbian and Hungarian, although Serbian citizens engaged in it more, especially Hungarians from Serbia. This category was particularly well-placed to engage in cross-border transactions as many had pre-existing networks of acquaintances and relatives in Hungary and knowledge of the Hungarian and Serbian language.

Small-scale smuggling networks often connected relatives and friends living on different sides of the border but it also took place between random business partners. For example a former resident of Kelebija, a village on the Serbian side of the border with Hungary, recalled how

> "a Hungarian [citizen] who had come to Serbia to sell petrol, equipped with a specially enlarged petrol tank in his car for the purpose, would simply knock on the door of a random house in Kelebija, and ask if the household deals in petrol. The trade was therefore profitable to both parties, and it knew no ethnic boundaries. Serbian businessmen were as much involved in the trade as Hungarian housewives."

Women played a key role in the small-scale trade between Serbia and Hungary, both travelling to and from the country supplying, transporting and selling goods, and also acting as intermediaries, for a certain amount of money allowing the

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20   Romanian ethno-pop, a sister style of Yugoslav NCFM.

petrol or the food and textiles to be stored at their homes until the customer came to pick it up. Smuggling as a social practice both supported and subverted traditional gender roles: During the bombing of Serbia in 1999, as men were prohibited from leaving the country, women would cross the borders in their place to buy goods and sell them back home. Yet, larger-scale illegal smuggling has remained reserved for men -- a differentiation of practices by no means unique in the history of transborder activity (see Cheater 1998). Also, the type of items traded by women were characteristically associated with the domestic sphere assigned to women, taking for granted that they are better at choosing the type of food, clothes etc. that is most demanded and profitable in Serbia - only to support a male/female dichotomy of *šverc*.

The small town of Jimbolia in Romania is located four kilometres from the Serbian border in Srpska Crnja and forms the railway terminus for the *šinobus* from Kikinda. During the 1990s it became a centre for trade (sanctions busting) in petrol and household goods. Surrounded on two sides by the Serbian border, according to two young male informants, "everybody in Jimbolia sold petrol". Towns like Jimbolia enjoyed an economic boom – petrol could be sold in Serbia for three times the Romanian price (see Andreas 2005: 345f.). Jimbolia remains a relatively wealthy town with low unemployment – residents pointed out that before the impact of the global economic crisis, factories in Jimbolia imported workers from Serbia to cover labour shortages.

Although Romania publicly supported the UN sanctions regime, violations were directed from the highest political level according to former intelligence chief Virgil Magureanu. Romanian investigation estimates that 695 train cars carried 36,000 tons of fuel into Serbia during the sanctions period escorted by the secret service (see ibid.). When Serbian males were unable to leave Serbia due to regulations imposed because of war at various points during the 1990s (1991-1994; 1999) Romanian men crossed the border to sell fuel directly in Serbia.

One bakery worker estimated half the town's adult population sold goods in Serbia, including his mother and grandmother. "People used to cross the border just to use the [Serbian] duty free shop, to legally buy cartons of cigarettes and then sell them in Jimbolia in cafes". He pointed out that many families have kin on opposite sides which served as go-betweens in markets and ad-hoc petrol stations as well as a social function. During the pig slaughtering season, a student from Jimbolia mentioned "all were together, Serbs, Romanians and Hungarians". Other inhabitants of the town also mentioned that the 1999 NATO bombing generated a degree of solidarity as the bombs were felt in Jimbolia and intruded on everyday activities "the planes were overhead while we were swimming and fishing, we felt the ground shake, literally", the student remembered.

Since the end of sanction regimes against Serbia the illegal petrol trade has diminished (though reports of illegal selling of fuel on the street do surface from time to time [Lj.B. 2008]). Passengers on the *šinobus* between Kikinda and Jimbolia have reduced in numbers. A Serbian border guard in Kikinda station recalled "before there were much more passengers [on the Kikinda-Jimbolia railbus] for economic reasons – three full wagons. Those who still go, those with family connections, go by car now. Serbs don't buy in Romania anymore because it's too expensive". In April 2010 on the *šinobus* only two other passengers were in the wagon along with the driver and conductor. At the open market in Jimbolia some Serbian (and Hungarian) goods were on display but no Serbian registered cars were visible – nor did we hear the Serbian language being spoken. One informant did mention a Serbian man who sells household goods informally, "*Vegeta*[21] and that type of thing" in cafes in Jimbolia.

Making a profit from smuggling as a full time job was considered by most informants to be rational given the massive unemployment of the time. An artist speaking about his home village in Serbia describes:

> "While local men were doing the petrol business in the yards of private homes with the driver and the passengers of buses from South Serbia that came to buy petrol in Kelebija and sell it at home in the South of the country, women were serving coffee to the 'guests', and after the transaction both parties shook hands, satisfied with the outcome."

He stresses, "There was no one I knew who would reject the business for nationalist reasons". Networks were formed, friendship-like relations were born, all in order to subsist or make a profit.

Smuggling was not a taboo topic; on the contrary, it was a fully visible everyday practice, a new layer of society, those who earned a fortune out of the petrol business, was created. These *nouveau rich* became visible by building eclectic bright-coloured huge villas and driving expensive cars. Yet, they were rather the exception than the rule, and smuggling remained a survival mechanism for most of the citizens of North Vojvodina, with only a few of those who "could afford to look down on their neighbours who engage in *šverc*".

As for the other smuggled goods, such as textiles and footwear, they were brought from Hungary together with petrol (sometimes worn in layers during the customs inspection by the smugglers themselves) then stored in improvised warehouses or private homes, and sold in the flea market in Subotica. As the arrangement of the customs inspection when travelling by train is such that customs officers enter the train after the vehicle has already entered Serbian territory as far as the first railway station, another option for their transport was

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21   A vegetable-flavoured additive ubiquitous in former Yugoslav kitchens.

to bring them by *šinobus* or regular train from Hungary and throw them out through the window into the fields before the customs inspection where it was arranged that someone would pick it up. We heard anecdotes of people from the area going out to the fields near the border in search of goods thrown from the train before the interlocutors had time to retrieve them.

European integration in the Pannonian plain – current opportunities and constraints for the cross-border informal economy

Improvement in socio-economic conditions and a levelling in prices between Hungary, Romania and Serbia since the 2000s render *šverc* a less important survival mechanism for Serbian citizens. Several informants noted, with a few exceptions, prices are more or less the same in Serbia, Romania and Hungary. "It is not worth doing it anymore". Cheap household goods and textiles are now commonly sourced from Turkey and China – sold in the so-called China shops, found all around in Vojvodina even in the small villages. Shops that used to sell smuggled clothes and shoes have been replaced by Chinese immigrants now who sell a range of Chinese manufactured items.

However, due to large price gaps between Serbia and EU states (including Romania and Hungary) in terms of cigarette prices and insufficient border controls cigarette smuggling is still big business with Serbia allegedly the leading state in the region (see Stanimirović 2010).[22] Reports have noted that Serbia remains a source of illicit cigarettes for Romania and most further EU markets and in particular the borders in Banat (see NUNS 2010).[23] Illicit cigarette trade is conducted so openly it is difficult for the casual visitor not to notice it.

At the Serbo-Romanian road border at Srpska Crnja/Jimbolia a new 'duty free shop' has been built tucked away discretely to the side of the Romanian customs buildings. The interior is stacked from floor to ceiling with cigarettes yet a Romanian border guard seated behind the counter told us upon entry that the cigarettes were not for sale. When we inquired why the shop displays hundreds of cartons of cigarettes with prices attached without selling them we were given a shrug and told *"reklame* – advertising purposes". A Serbian border guard later explained more frankly the purpose of the shop. "It's organized crime. They only sell in bulk to truck drivers and the like; they can't sell in

22 See http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Drustvo/194802/Srbija-prva-u-regionu-po-svercu-cigareta (last access: 20.05.2011).
23 See http://www.vesti.rs/Blogovi/Vrsac-novi-centar-sverca-cigareta.html (last access: 20.05.2011).

smaller quantities. A criminal organised it for them. Now that they are in the EU and they can do anything they like", she responded cynically.[24]

Crossing the same border a few months later early on a Friday night, the queue of cars moved at a snail's pace through the Romanian side of the border. All the cars waiting were Romanian with Timişoara (TM) licence plates. Many of the passengers (the majority males aged 20 to 40) appeared to know one another and fraternised beside the parked cars. As the queue slowly moved towards customs some cars turned back into Romania either through their own accord or under the instructions of police and customs. Approximately 100 meters after the Serbian border controls over 15 cars and over 30 people loitered outside a solitary grocery shop in the otherwise empty countryside. A couple of men were loading boxes into a car boot carried from the premises of a long deserted motel. Most cars had Romanian licence plates – only two were from Serbia. Upon our entry to a bar in a nearby village the customers and waiter were speaking about the smuggling operation. "It's a bad shift for them [smugglers]" the waiter commented. He explained that Romanians obtain cigarettes in Serbia and transport them across the border. Some Serbian citizens also participate. This is done by making a deal with certain border guards – thus the cigarette smugglers have to wait until a suitable permutation of border guards are on duty on both the Serbian and Romanian sides of the border post until they can transport their goods from Serbia to Romania. The group must wait until shifts change necessitating hours of waiting in cars until they can securely pass the border. "So *šverc* is back to life in these parts?" – "Yes it is", the waiter responded with a bemused and slightly proud expression.

4 Interpreting *šverc*: Morality, social and cultural capital

Moral šverc?

Exploring the social dimensions of *šverc* in heterogeneous border regions we found that there was indeed a high tolerance for smuggling and the practice is very much embedded in the realm of the ordinary and the everyday. We did not encounter patriotic interpretations of cross-border grey transactions – in border areas of Vojvodina ethnic categories are quite blurred and flexible. From the perspective of Belgrade, Budapest and Bucharest the border areas in question and towns like Kikinda, Jimbolia, Subotica, Timisoara and Szeged do not fit

24 Duty free shops were part of a significant organised crime network in Serbia during the 1990s with a chain operated by Marko Milošević (son of Slobodan). See also: http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Hronika/t31880.lt.html (last access: 20.05.2011).

comfortably into proscribed national categories. Thus 'patriotism' is confused – to which nation-state would (could) patriotism be directed? Our research finds that practical categories and rational motivations such as visa regimes, police and state regulations, supply and demand, price differentiation held more weight than ethno-national categories. A significant amount of *šverc* involved the formation of interethnic 'circumstantial coalitions' (see Monterescu 2009), embedded multiculturalism detached from the normative weight that the term implies. By and large our informants articulated ethnicity as a social fact and were cynical of (often externally driven) normative multiculturalism.

The state itself (represented by sets of institutions and individual politicians) is commonly viewed as ambiguous at best, deeply immoral and dysfunctional at worst, justifying *šverc*, at least on smaller scales. A great amount of discourse on smuggling from the perspective of North Atlantic states focuses on concepts like 'rule of law', and 'corruption'. However many Serbian citizens (and Hungarians and Romanians) are acutely aware that the upper echelons of power in the state do not pay much more than lip service to such principles and thus *šverc* becomes legitimised on the basis of survival. (If the state does not function according to the rule of law why should cross-border transactions?). Public perception of the state in Serbia holds it to be extremely weak in delivering basic rights for its citizens (see Kostovicova/Bojičić-Dželilović 2008: 12, 15; Krastev 2002). Recent survey data shows that more people consider criminals to rule Serbia (23 percent) than state institutions of governance (18 per cent) (see Cvejić 2010).

We found that many informants' narratives of small-scale smuggling were delineated from mass smuggling, organised crime or the smuggling of narcotics. In the border regions of Vojvodina smuggling was commonly conceived in two normative streams. On the one hand what could be termed 'subsistence smuggling', the smuggling of items used for personal use or for selling in small quantities at markets, is an embedded phenomenon with a long precedent and to a large degree socially acceptable. For instance a passenger on the Subotica - Szeged *šinobus* told us that even though she did not participate in the illegal trade going on between Szeged – Subotica, but being from Szeged, she had naturally heard stories about it and described it in blatantly obvious terms. "Of course people were smuggling, they [the customs officers] didn't let them take stuff over the border legally so they had to". On the other hand organised crime - for example the large-scale smuggling of cigarettes, alcohol and narcotics is considered a criminal act and a social taboo; widely reported in news media in these terms (see Stanimirović 2010; NUNS 2010; Danilović 2007). These notions of morality cohere with Jašarević's research which is also concerned with *šverc* in a multiethnic setting. She finds that for its traders, the Arizona market is a "negotiation of customary, normative claims to subsistence against

neoliberal claims to profit" (Jašarević 2007: 282-283). In the case of borderland Vojvodina such claims were levelled against the state and 'organised' criminals who were frequently deemed to be in cahoots against the ordinary people ('*narod*').

Šverc as capital

In the classical Marxian sense of the term, capital means both a surplus value and an investment with expected returns in the market. Also, capital is associated with the production as well as the exchange of commodities; it is a process rather than a commodity or a value, and it involves social activities (see Lin 2001). If we explore small-scale trade between Serbia and Romania and Serbia and Hungary, we observe that making money was possible only through investment, and not only financial, but also investing in human relationships that were necessary to start and to sustain business. It is obvious that profit was only possible through a social activity where two parties exchanged goods, and what was exchanged varied in the two cases. On an abstract level we can see the exchange between Serbia and Romania in terms of cultural capital (see Bourdieu 1982), while the exchange between Serbia and Hungary as an exchange where social capital (see ibid.) was made use of.

Using the neo-capital theory of cultural capital in its broadest sense and stripping it from its focus on class relations, we can conceptualise it as the process whereby a group establishes its culture to be the dominant one, which is in turn internalised by the group lower in the imagined hierarchy. Cultural capital can be converted into economic capital, i.e. it is invested in order to make profit (see Lin 2001). To Bourdieu (1982), culture is a system of symbols and meanings. Therefore cultural elements imposed by one group and accepted by the other are the symbols and their interpretation by the dominant group. We can understand the trade between Serbia and Romania in the 1980s, even though not fully equate it to the concept, using the term cultural capital: dissemination of the elements of Serbian culture through the media into Romanian society and utilising this cultural capital in later instances of trade.

For instance Serbian sellers assumed it to be natural that some knowledge of the Serbian language existed on the Romanian side of the border, and thus they could communicate with their buyers in their own language. Also it was taken for granted that Romanian customers had some knowledge of certain Serbian products. The demand for certain Serbian items in Romania was utilized by Serbian smugglers/sellers as a kind of cultural capital that they possessed, that was exchanged for financial gain.

In the cases of smuggling to and from both Hungary and Romania we can see the illegal activities and the networks formed by it as positioning the participants in a social space that is only partly defined by nationality and/or citizenship. Rather, *šverc* gave the actor means to survival strategies and ways to make money, change their status and accumulate what Bourdieu defined as social capital:

> "[T]he aggregate of actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition (...) which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a 'credential'." (ibid: 51)

Social capital is always embedded in exchanges, material or symbolic, and needs constantly to be invested in to be transformed into economic capital (see ibid.). This is not only true for the new criminal elite associated with the Milošević regime who made a fortune but also to the 'common' people for whom *šverc* was a survival strategy (or at least a means of mitigating a difficult economic situation) and who actually made use of their relationship networks, their knowledge of Hungarian, or strategic information about the border area as resources in order to make profit ("I know people there"). For instance, having a relative who deals in petrol in Kelebia is by all means a resource for a small-scale smuggler from Szeged, or a family friend who works as a customs officer at the border definitely makes the illegal exchange easier. In other words, social capital is the "investment in social relations with expected returns in the marketplace" (Lin 2001: 19).

Šinobus and šverc as cultural commodities

"Everything is more relaxed", a traveller on the *šinobus* between Horgoš and Szeged commented. The same person, upon mentioning the possibility that the line is about to be closed, shrugs her shoulders, expressing apathy towards the future of the 'grey lightning'[25]. Like the conductor on the Kikinda – Jimbolia railbus, she recalls the 1990s when the train had not one but two or three carriages, all of them full, unlike today which sees less than a dozen passengers per journey.

As several *šinobus* lines have ceased[26] and the *šinobus* of the Serbian Railways became incompatible with EU standards the railbus is becoming a

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25   The nickname for the *šinobus* of the Serbian (Former Yugoslavian) Railways.
26   The *šinobus* lines Ruma (Serbia) – Zvornik (Bosnia) and Šid (Serbia) – Bijeljina (Bosnia) have already been closed.

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remnant of the past. However, there are indications that the *šinobus* might actually survive – at least in a recontextualised cultural form. It has been commodified culturally by a couple of regional artists. In 2010 the third festival called *Kultúrcsempész*[27] ('Culture Smuggler') boarded the Szeged – Subotica *šinobus* alongside the real ticket-inspectors, the audience and other passengers. Festival organiser, writer Roland Orcsik describes the festival as a means of "decontextualising the *šinobus* as a symbol of smuggling, using the concept ironically, and building on its narrative"[28]. Participants travel from Szeged to Subotica on the *šinobus* spending the night and returning the next day. Contemporary Serbian and Hungarian poetry and short stories are read on the railcar and participants socialise in the tatty train stations bars along the way[29] during the two hour ride, exhibitions are opened and concerts are held in Szeged and Subotica. The festival is supported by organisations and cultural groups on both sides of the Serbo-Hungarian border.

Orcsik and the other organisers frequently travelled by *šinobus* with other students and smugglers, watching how the customs officers "tore the railcar apart" in search of contraband. For him, like for many young people from Vojvodina who have studied in Hungary, the *šinobus* and the border are a "symbol of his poetry and his life". The idea for the festival originated during a period in the mid 2000s when a number of ethnically framed violent incidents occurred in Vojvodina (see Hagan 2009: 625ff.; HRW 2005; Bieber/Winterhagen 2006). Serbian media mostly ignored the incidents while Hungarian press frequently labelled Serbs as '*četniks*'[30]. Feeling bad about these negative processes as a Serbo-Hungarian, Orcsik decided to do something positive in the region – 'smuggling culture'. Smuggling is meant ironically, as a means of distance from clichéd terms like 'multicultural' or 'interculturalism'. He adds that 'although the *šinobus* is a symbol of smuggling for us, for the smugglers it's a symbol of survival'. The *Kultúrcsempész* festival removes the idea of smuggling from its usual context and sets it in a new one, but does it through retaining one of its symbols, turning the *šinobus* into a *lieu de mémoire*, the embodiment of memory at a certain site. One of the conditions of a *lieu de mémoire* to exist is its capacity to change and to recycle meaning, and its goal is to capture memory (see Nora 1989). We see the main idea of the festival, to emphasize the long-lasting intercultural and regional relationships (see Berényi

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27   *Kultúrcsempész* website: http://kulturcsempesz.blogspot.com/ (last access: 20.05.2011).
28   Personal correspondence with authors, September 2010.
29   *Krčme* (Sebian), *kocsma* (Hungarian).
30   *Četnik* – a violent royalist Serbian national movement from World War II. The term gained renewed notoriety in the 1990s wars with the formation of *četnik* paramilitary groups. It is used as a derogatory term for Serbs.

2009) as an attempt to conserve the memory of the 1990s through its re-contextualization. The festival has been attended by a Novi Sad based band, active since 2001 who call themselves '*Šinobusi*' in honour of the railbus. Former participants of the 'culture-smuggling' festival, the band makes visual use of railway imagery and incorporates it into its songs (titles like 'Endless tracks' and 'Silver arrow'[31]).

Fig. 10: *Kultúrcsempész* - the *šinobus* festival[32]

5   Conclusion

We have sought to examine three broad flows of the informal cross-border economy in Vojvodina. In the 1980s Yugoslavia was a source for material goods and cultural products for its poorer and more isolated socialist neighbours. Simultaneous to the rise of nationalism in Serbia and other republics, Yugoslavia

31   'Beskrajna pruga' and 'Srebrna Strela' – another nickname for the Serbian Railways' *šinobus*.
32   Source: Edvárd Molnár. In: Magyar Szóe, URL: http://www.magyarszo.com/fex.page:2009-10-19_A_II_Kulturcsempesz_Sinbusz_Fesztival_margojara.xhtml (last access: 30.06.2011).

witnessed a 'last cry' of pan-Yugoslav pop-culture.[33] We examine how part of this culture, newly composed folk music, made its way illicitly into Romania through the Banat region. The legacy of this music is evident in the visual and audible traces of Serbian pop-culture in the city of Timişoara and the impact of Serbian pop-folk on contemporary Romanian ethno-pop, *muzică orientală*. The 1990s saw a massive change in the relationship between Serbia and its neighbours – the end of communism saw regime changes in Hungary and Romania, the availability of consumer goods with the adoption of the market economy. The cold-war geopolitical hierarchy which saw Serbia/Yugoslavia hold a more prestigious position than its Warsaw Pact neighbours was inverted by the early 1990s. War and sanctions in Serbia rendered Vojvodina poor and isolated. Serbia became dependent upon the resources of Hungary and Romania. As part of this process we have examined narratives of the smuggling of household necessities and fuel into North-eastern Vojvodina from Hungary and Romania. The post-2000 era is characterised by processes of European integration. 2000 marked the end of the Milošević regime in Serbia and the beginning of meaningful democratisation and the relative normalisation of public life. Hungary and Romania became EU member states in 2004 and 2006 respectively. As the shortages and crises of the 1980s and 1990s receded so did *šverc* to a certain degree. With the equalisation of prices for many goods at three sides of the borders there is less incentive to smuggle – cultural products and other goods are freely available through legal channels. However, as we have demonstrated by reference to our own research in Banat, cigarette smuggling is still big business driven by a gap in the price between Serbia and bordering EU states and ambiguous standards of border regulation.

Other than tracing the dynamics of small-scale smuggling chronologically we sought to observe the practice from the normative perspectives of informants we communicated with. What can be observed is that unlike bigger-scale smuggling or the trade of illegal weapons, narcotics or human trafficking, *šverc* is not a social taboo. Rather, it is embedded in the everyday practices of the actors involved in it and viewed by them as one of the many strategies of surviving economic difficulties and ubiquitous to border life in this particular area. The immorality of the state as represented by institutions and public figures is considered a key justification for *šverc*. Search narratives sharply contrast with concerned actors who fret about the negative impact of smuggling upon processes of Europeanization. Widespread smuggling visible to passengers and officials alike at the Hungarian and Romanian side of their borders with Serbia

33   This is embodied by the Yugoslav New Wave (Idoli, Azra), pop stars like Lepa Brena and Tajči, and events like the 1984 Sarajevo Winter Olympics, the 1987 Zagreb Universiade and the 1989 Yugoslav win in the Eurovision Song Contest with the band Riva.

surely negate the notion of European integration as a departure from the grey economy. In fact as one Serbian border guard drolly commented to us, neighbouring states to Serbia now in the EU can 'do what they want' without major consequences. In this case she was referring to a major smuggling ring operating at the border post by organised criminals.

One may expect a study of a multi-national, multi-lingual border region to revolve around ethno-national categories, particularly in a state like Serbia where nationalism remains an extremely tangible element of socio-political life. However, we found that in the border regions of the Serbia, Hungary and Romania a certain degree of cultural heterogeneity and ambiguity violates a Gellnerian model of nationalism which presupposes cultural homogeneity as contingent for the political principle of nationalism (see Gellner 1983, 1997). While ethno-national categories were resonant, evident by the casual reification of many informants who spoke of 'the Serbs' and 'the Hungarians' as bounded homogenous groups, the actions of most respondents did not cohere with such narrow ethno-national conceptions. Ethno-national belonging appeared to be more or less accepted as a social fact by informants but did not represent a touchstone which would dictate *šverc* and other cross-border activities. Many categories were posited as sources of difference not only ethnically but socio-economically, regionally and morally and thus demanding a less 'ethnicised lens' of the researcher.

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