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N DUGAVE? THERE WITH THE *AZILANTI*?

Racialization and the Changing Discourses of Mixedness and Safety on the Periphery of Zagreb

Igor Petričević
Independent Researcher, Zagreb

This ethnographic study explores the transformation of Dugave, (Novi) Zagreb, focusing on racialization and safety perceptions in the context of non-European migration. Analyzing urban meanings and historical narratives, the research analyzes talk about "azilanti," assumptions of Croatian whiteness, and unveils the layers of mixedness in Dugave. The article emphasizes the coexistence of perceptions of safety and danger, looking into the gendered dynamic of socio-spatial marginalization with regard to crime, drugs, and hooliganism inscribed in postsocialist and postwar Dugave. The study underscores the need to study the nuances of migrant emplacement as embedded in local histories and global racialized hierarchies.

Keywords: Balkan route, Dugave, asylum seekers, racialization, safety

Introduction

Zagreb has become a new transit and arrival city for significant numbers of non-European migrants,[1] starting in the early 2000s and notably intensifying after the "migration and refugee crisis" of 2015–16.[2] From 2006 to 2023, 1,091 people were granted international protection in Croatia. Although the demographics vary year to year, most asylum seekers come from Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq (Ministarstvo unutarnjih poslova 2023). Since 2011, the majority have been accommodated in the reception center for asylum seekers known as Hotel Porin, located in the Dugave neighborhood on the southeast periphery of the city of Zagreb.[3]

1 While the distinction between "migrant" and "non-migrant" – like any act of categorization – cannot be disentangled from power relations, it is significant both normatively and empirically (Anderson 2019: 5). In this article, I use the term "migrants" as an analytical category, referring to non-Croatian, often racialized newcomers who move across borders and who can be labeled as "migrants" even when they are no longer on the move. Similarly, in Bihać, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Helms (2022: 284) notes that the term *migranti* refers to non-Europeans, racialized and othered in opposition to locals, and designated like any other outsider by phenotype, dress, language, and patterns of moving through the town, even as these markers were not always reliable or accurate.

2 Additionally, the city has seen a rise in labor migrants from Asian countries in the 2020s who are not the focus of this research. However, the study's insights into racialization may inform future research on newer migration patterns, while considering differences in scale and context.

3 Hotel Porin could be classified as a semi-open reception center. It accommodates between 200 and 700 people, depending on the migration dynamics on the route. The residents are allowed to move in the city, but are expected to respect the curfew and return to the hotel by 11 p.m.

The parts of the urban fabric with new migrants like Dugave that can be conceptualized as "arrival infrastructures" (Meeus et al. 2019: 1) experiencing social and spatial transformations have not been studied in detail. Gregurović et al. (2019) compared attitudes towards asylum seekers in Dugave with those in the neighborhood of Trnje, where asylum seekers are not accommodated. Noting the significant role of media in shaping perception, they found that Dugave residents expressed more negative attitudes, a stronger ethnic distance, and perceived asylum seekers as a greater health and economic threat. They also, to a greater extent, related asylum seekers to economic migrants, particularly in the aftermath of the Paris terrorist attacks.

While an increasing number of studies focus on migrants' experiences, securitization, and the legal and humanitarian aspects of the involvement of citizens and localities en route,[4] there is a gap in situated ethnographic research on the transformations of the city of Zagreb, particularly with regards to local residents' perceptions and narratives regarding asylum seekers, asylees, and the spaces they inhabit. Moreover, studies of racialization in Croatia are a blind spot in ethnographic research, a gap that is particularly pertinent given the recent increase in attacks on foreigners of various legal statuses.

Methodologically, this study draws from year-long fieldwork conducted in various parts of the city of Zagreb, with a specific focus on the Dugave neighborhood. The research methodology involved a combination of interviews and participant observation that spanned the period between 2017–2018, during which I moved to Dugave and lived as a resident for a year while volunteering at Hotel Porin as a cleaner and Croatian language teacher. I also had many informal conversations with city residents of different ages, genders, nationalities, legal statuses, and education levels.[5] My network of contacts was influenced by my nationality, proficiency in Croatian and English, gender, and serendipitous encounters. While the research included both migrants and local residents, this article focuses on the latter, reflecting the need to present these more neglected perspectives from an ethnographic standpoint. While local hospitality was present in Dugave, this article places a heavier emphasis on the understudied discourses of racialization.[6]

This research does not constitute a comprehensive community study of Dugave.[7] Instead, it focuses on how discourses of racialization have permeated the everyday life of Dugave residents, changing the perception of mixedness and safety due to the fluctuation of migrants in the area. Dugave is a complex and diverse area with a rich history that overlaps with neighboring areas, making it difficult to define as a

4 For some examples, see Rydzewski (2024); Grubiša (2022); Petričević (2023); Hameršak et al. (2020); Kurnik and Razsa 2020; Rexhepi (2018); Čapo (2015).

5 My interlocutors' names have been changed for reasons of confidentiality unless they specified otherwise and consented to the use of their real names.

6 Initiatives to familiarize Dugave residents with the newcomers existed, such as events in the library, park, or school where some children from Hotel Porin enrolled. However, these had not been very frequent and attended by many people during my fieldwork, further influencing the results of the study. See, for example, Jurković (2023) for sport and refugee integration in Croatia as a contrast.

7 I build on approaches to space as a product of social relations, crisscrossed by (trans-)local mobilities of different types (Masey 2005: 118) and as a site of multiple voices and meanings.

circumscribed spatial unit. My interlocutors hailed from various backgrounds, some residing outside Dugave or having moved in and out over their lifetime. Their perspectives varied based on demographic variables, ideological worldviews, exposure to rumors, and spatial proximity to Hotel Porin.[8] The findings highlighted in this article should not be understood as representative of the whole of Dugave but only partial and mostly male perspectives among the many. Furthermore, the study does not aim to argue that all Dugave residents racialize migrants, nor that racialization is a cultural trait of people living on the periphery. Rather, it opens the discussion on the emerging and changing interrelationships between migration, space, racialization, and discourses of safety and danger at a particular juncture in time.

Contributing to the emerging scholarly interest in the encounters between postsocialism and postcolonialism (Manolova et al. 2019; Chari and Verdery 2009), particularly on the relationships between the hitherto neglected focus on racial discourses in the (post)-Yugoslav region (Baker 2018; Bjelić 2018), this article analyzes some of the urban meanings and perceptions of Dugave among Zagreb residents both living within and outside of the neighborhood with regards to the presence of migrants. The intersection between postsocialism and postcolonialism is examined in this article in the pervasive "talk" surrounding so-called *azilanti*, comprising everyday conversations, stories, rumors, gossip, and jokes, often incorporating notions of race and feelings of danger while also signaling social distance.[9]

This article explores narratives of undesirability, whiteness, mixedness, and safety from a historically informed perspective, contrasting the meaning-making processes related to the (post)socialist era with those resulting from the new immigration associated with the accommodation of migrants in Hotel Porin since 2011. Such an analysis provides insights into the relationships between migrants from the Global South and other city residents on the European and urban periphery.[10] From the perspective of the local residents, the article presents ways of negotiating, as Majstorović (2023) argues, the "different yet entangled inequalities" converging in a space inhabited by different "peripheral selves." Spaces like these should be analyzed in relation to the local/regional context and also, as Rexhepi (2022) argues, the larger context of the coloniality of racial capitalism that is becoming more visible in the region as former Yugoslav countries transform into gateways and borderlands of the EU.[11]

8 Those closest to the reception center often expressed more concerns, though distinctions were not always clear-cut and generalizations should be made cautiously.

9 Gossip and rumor have long been recognized in anthropology for their role in both creating bonds and establishing boundaries (Gluckman 1963). Caldeira (2001: 1–19) argues that opinions and perceptions shaped by fear and discussions of crime not only reflect but also contribute to the formation of simplistic and stereotypical interpretations. They structure the urban landscape and public space, influencing social interactions and foster new patterns of urban segregation.

10 While this study in Dugave exemplifies certain dimensions of life on the edge of the city in a country on the external border of the EU, it should not be understood either as a symbolic representation of peripherality in European cities more broadly or as an argument that racialization and other meaning-making processes pertaining to migration are purely a result of peripherality.

11 Discussing the seemingly small and situated acts of "white enclosure" towards migrants and other racialized minorities in the Balkans, Rexhepi (2022: 4) points out their past and present embeddedness into global ideas about racial hierarchies, divisions and erasures, as well as that "the normalisation of postsocialist racist politics has gone hand in hand with the EU and NATO's eastern expansion."

This article argues that racialization, defined as a culturally and historically specific ideological process whereby racial meaning is extended to particular relations, practices, individuals, or objects (Omi and Winant 1986), is a crucial aspect of transformations of urban meanings in the context of non-European migration to Zagreb. I describe how essentialist categorization emerges, redefining people and places, as Dugave is incorporated into the European border regime, and how it is being shaped by the dispersion of borders into the city (Balibar 2003).[12] Racialization reshapes urban spaces as "non-white" and "undesirable" and generates affects that impede local hospitality. It is important to note that the majority of migrants are in transit, which complicates the establishment of relationships with locals and mutual understanding. This dynamic creates fertile ground for stereotyping and racialization that, in turn, hamper place attachment even among those migrants willing to stay.

In Dugave and throughout Zagreb, I encountered the narrative about Croatian racial and linguistic homogeneity ("we are all white, speak the same language") in relation to the current migration patterns perceived as a novel change. The article contextualizes this type of racialization by pointing out more nuanced interpretations of national and regional relations to racial discourses in existing literature that highlight ambiguity. Furthermore, narratives regarding current mixedness in Dugave are historicized and contrasted with Yugoslav-era class and national mixing in order to complicate this discourse on homogeneity. Finally, the article depicts narratives of disrupted security and changing perceptions of danger relating to the presence of migrants amid rumors regarding thefts and sexual assaults. I highlight that those perceptions of threat had preceded the arrival of migrants, even though they came to be blamed for the neighborhood's dangerous reputation among many city residents. These issues, connected to hooliganism and the presence of drugs and crime on the urban periphery, point to the more general processes of postsocialist and post-war marginalization in Dugave.[13] In this context, some aspects of anti-migrant hostility are analyzed in relation to precarious masculinities. While racialization was a response to migration among many interlocutors of different ages, genders, and classes, the material presented in this article predominantly focuses on men in their 20s and 30s, often unemployed or working in low-paid, temporary or otherwise insecure jobs, reflecting the researcher's positionality.

In conclusion, the article emphasizes the need to embed the study of migrant emplacement and neighborhood dynamics in local history. In Dugave, this means focusing attention on the legacies of Yugoslav socialism and urbanization, the 1990s war and nationalism, and postsocialist transformations that contain the potential to both bolster and contest racialization. Global racial discourses, historical inscriptions,

12 Besides Hotel Porin, now under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, which serves as a type of "camp," in an Agambenian sense, where persons and groups are filtered at the gates of Schengen area while they live in a securitized environment, the spread of borders into the urban tissue is apparent in other ways as well. The number of fences in neighboring areas has increased over the years, as have police presence and surveillance (Petričević 2024). I would often be stopped and asked for ID when walking around Dugave, whether alone or in the company of asylum seekers.

13 Though these processes are not limited to Dugave, it is the only neighborhood in Zagreb where they significantly overlap with asylum migration.

migration, and socioeconomic changes jointly influence the residents' sense of belonging and safety, thus requiring a nuanced analysis of how migration and places of arrival interact.

"In Dugave? There with the *Azilanti*?"

Before finding a flat in Dugave, I stayed at my friend Sara's flat on the opposite side of the city. At dinner, my friend's boyfriend Mirko, a 26-year-old Zagreb resident, commented on how some of his friends had discussed the first large groups of migrants to cross Croatian borders in 2015. He said, "They got really angry. They wanted to go and beat them all at the border [...] beat everybody, even the women and the kids..." When I asked him why, he answered, "I don't know. Those guys are just crazy." Although Mirko did not share the aggressive attitude of his friends, when he heard that I planned to conduct some of my fieldwork at Hotel Porin, he responded with disbelief, saying, "You actually plan to go inside?" Mirko paused, then continued, "I would never go in there." Then he looked down and shrugged his shoulders, "I don't know why." I encountered this embodied need for distance throughout the city. It manifested in his friends as racist extremism and in Mirko as a sense of discomfort. Most of my interlocutors had difficulties explaining the reasons for their position.

Around a week later, I briefly met a friend of a friend, Dora, a Croatian woman in her twenties. She had spent some time in Dugave as a social worker. As I was still looking for housing in Dugave, Dora asked me, "You want an apartment there, next to the Blacks and Arabs (*Crnci i Arapi*)?" with a racist undertone. She said she hated going to Dugave for her work and seemed to be uncomfortable with the very idea of being there. The combination of surprise, fear, and disgust in her question implied that Dugave was not a good place to live precisely because of the migrants. While Mirko wished to avoid Hotel Porin, Dora wished to avoid the entire neighborhood. I asked another friend who had grown up in central Zagreb if he knew anyone from Dugave. He replied, "No, no. I always avoid those places [...] the periphery, Dugave... Dubrava, as well." Often, whenever I said I lived in Dugave, a common question would be, "In Dugave? There with the *azilanti*?" implying a sense of danger or, at best, curiosity. After I moved into Dugave, a young man living close by asked me, "So, have you seen those Mujahideen?"

Finally, I met with Hana, a young woman living in Dugave whom I had known for a few years. In terms of perceptions of Dugave as a place full of "dangerous" asylum seekers, she told me, "I mean, I know about these kinds of positions, but [...] in my circles, mostly people with [university] degrees, people don't have anything against them." Hana's position was influenced by the fact that she had first-hand experience of non-threatening encounters with newcomers. She went on to say that, in the beginning, people did not have many negative opinions because there were

only a few migrants in Croatia at the time. She then mentioned a shift as the number of migrants started growing. "You started to hear people speaking about 'groups of dark-skinned men' walking the streets, and some in a Facebook group talked about organizing and going to beat them up."

Given the predominant transient nature of migration and high turnover of Porin residents, attitudes towards the migrants were changing depending on the dynamics of the route. For example, during my fieldwork, there were fewer migrants in the hotel and more women and children than the year before, which produced a calmer social atmosphere. While some Dugave residents told me that asylum seekers used to hang out in the park more often in previous years, I rarely noticed gatherings of migrants in larger groups in Dugave spaces further from Hotel Porin. It seems that longer periods of calm contributed to the residents' indifference and tolerance of asylum seekers' presence in Dugave. However, specific incidents, particularly rumors of sexual harassment, triggered spikes in more hostile attitudes. For example, I heard of one case in which a young woman had an uncomfortable experience with a man living in Porin, and her boyfriend and his friends, all football fans, threatened to set the hotel on fire, causing an increase in police presence around it. This also generated a discourse that the police and government are more interested in protecting "them" than "us."

Many Dugave residents I met complained they were not consulted about opening a reception center near them and considered themselves victims of European, state, and municipal politics. As I found out during fieldwork, in the first years after migrants started arriving, the neighbors living in the street closest to the hotel wrote to the media and organized a petition in an unsuccessful bid to displace the reception center. A common complaint was also a drop in property value, as well as the presence of smugglers and police around the hotel. Transnational and generalizing discourses also played a part, with people saying, for example, "You see what has happened to France and Germany after they had accepted migrants," as one woman in her forties told me. Despite encountering some individuals who expressed a preference for migrants to be accommodated elsewhere, my discussions revealed that many of the residents in Dugave were either indifferent to their presence or had resigned themselves to their accommodation, showing a passive acceptance of the situation.[14] Nevertheless, in my presence, the talk about migrants often consisted of racializing discourses. Therefore, while there was no successful political action against the migrants, racialization still operated on the level of speech, opinion, and everyday talk as a means of producing meaning and group boundaries. Even when not accompanied by social action, this discourse contributes to an atmosphere in which racialized perceptions and stereotypes are normalized and perpetuated and which can, in situations of social distress, exacerbate aggressive behavior against migrants.

14 Ajduković et al. (2019) point out that Croatian citizens, on average, express a neutral attitude towards refugees. Moreover, the majority of citizens from the national survey (70.7 %) expressed that refugees should both accept Croatian culture and maintain their own.

While some could not describe with any precision an embodied need for distance from "these asylees" (*ovi azilanti)*, others would use racialized terms such as "groups of dark-skinned men," "Blacks and Arabs," "Mujahideen," or even terms such as "animals," "cattle," and "cockroaches," which place the migrants not only beyond the social boundary but also outside of humanity. These terms simultaneously influence the undesirability of the neighborhood and exacerbate the alterity of migrants. They can actively be used to maintain social distance and result in the further exclusion of already marginalized people living on the edge of Dugave, as these labels stigmatize and dehumanize migrants and foster fear and discomfort, leading to limited interaction.

Novi Zagreb had, even before the asylum seekers arrived, been labeled as undesirable by many city residents, with its reputation for "bedroom neighborhoods" (*spavaonice*) (Gulin Zrnić 2009). However, when I inquired about moving to Dugave, I encountered a different meaning behind its undesirability. One news article, relying on the narrative of a single Dugave resident, attributed the cynical label of "Refugee Afrocommunity" to the neighborhood (Butorac 2013). Moving in, I discovered that the talk of *azilanti* is widespread in Dugave. It emerges out of social interactions and produces frameworks within which to interpret future encounters. Many of my interlocutors commonly described living close to the newcomers as uncomfortable or unpleasant (*neugodno/nelagodno*). The most common grievance was regarding accounts of migrant men attacking local women. There had been a few sexual assaults that had significantly increased tensions. I often heard people reference an incident in August 2017, when an Afghan man, recently deported from Austria, had followed an older woman from the bus to her building, where he attacked her. It was a Sunday morning, and the neighbors heard her scream for help, causing the man to run away. There was another report of an attack a week later at the central station (Večernji list 2017; Riportal 2017).

In contrast to many narratives in which these events are considered proof of migrants' antisocial behavior, a young Croatian woman living close to the street of the first attack said, "In all these years, I've known of only two attacks," pointing out how easily her neighbors generalized. Some other women told me they no longer feel the same walking alone at night or sitting at the bus stop. Regardless, these events, as well as stories of migrants breaking into yards and cars, were a strong driving force behind the rumors that depicted the disrupted social life and sense of safety. They were also a fertile ground for racialized and gendered discourses regarding non-European migrant men. In everyday talk, "uncivilized" behavior, references to skin tone, but also religious boundary-making across gender, as exemplified by derogatory comments about veiled Muslim women (*zamotane*), served as a foil to the construction of Croatian whiteness, Europeanness, and civilization,[15] thereby accentuating differences.

15 As Razsa and Lindstrom (2004: 649) highlight, references to belonging to Central European and Mediterranean cultural circles, as well as Catholicism, were significant in asserting Croatian Europeanness, particularly in the 1990s, although there existed perceptions of being defenders of Europe long before, as contained in the notion of *Antemurale Christianitatis* ("defense walls of Christianity").

"Where Everyone is White"

While we were sitting in a bar in Dugave one evening, Hana commented on why she thought people were making such a fuss about this new migration, "People here [in Croatia], especially older people, were generally moving only in other places in Yugoslavia, where everyone is white." While I had noticed some of the older residents avoiding the migrants in Dugave, for example, not sitting next to them on the bus, many had expressed compassion, pointing out that "we were also refugees," or holding differing and, at times, contradictory views. For example, a woman in her fifties said she felt for them but still used racializing terminology and generalizations. Other common views included suggestions to keep the migrants under greater control, that is, not allowing them to move freely around the neighborhood and accommodating them further from the local population. Some months later, I attended a lecture on asylum seekers in central Zagreb. A scholar presented her research on the particular challenges faced by asylum seekers in Croatia in comparison to the West, addressing an audience composed mostly of young Croatian students. She said, "Look around here. We are all pretty *white*. No one has a different skin color. We all speak Croatian; we are still a very homogeneous society."

Both narratives suggest that Croatia is different from Western European "multicultural" countries. One assumption underlying these narratives is that because Croatia was on the opposite side of Europe from the capitalist West, people in former Yugoslav countries have not been exposed to "differences" in the same way, resulting in a type of ignorance that can make life challenging for migrants arriving from non-European countries.[16] Another assumption is that "everyone is white" and, therefore, the country is "homogeneous." This is a type of common-sensical discourse I often hear, even at academic conferences and among pro-migrant activists, that risks normalizing racial whiteness as a given rather than a socially produced and negotiated construction.[17] Unlike these two women, I considered it strange to take Croatian "whiteness" for granted. Hana, who had lived abroad for a while as an exchange student, was a Croatian woman with lighter skin and blonde hair. As a Croatian man with darker hair and skin who had combined my studies with low-skilled work while I was abroad, and as a minority, I had had different encounters with Western European racializing discourses that categorized me as "non-white." This made me more reluctant to assume that Croatians are unambiguously white, the discourse that I first noticed in Croatia after the presence of non-European migrants had increased.

The heavily bordered European space has been designated a "white fortress" (Gilroy 2000: 247). As De Genova (2018: 1769) points out, "the very figure of migration is always already racialized" in the European context. He suggests that "the

16 However, in the socialist period, Yugoslavia was part of the Non-Aligned Movement. Migrants from Africa, Middle East and Asia arrived for studies and work, albeit not in large numbers.

17 See, for example, this report about one man racialized at the Zagreb airport by means of police profiling justified by the discourse of Croatia being a "homogeneous society of whites" (Opačić 2024). Cf. Baker et al. (2024) on Central and Eastern Europe being understood as "off white" but witnessing the rising aspirations for belonging to white Europe.

borders of Europe are entangled with a global (post-colonial) politics of race." Their location between West and East means that the Balkans have always been a region of ambiguity in terms of both geopolitics and racial discourses. Populations in the Balkans predominantly understand themselves to be "white and non-colonial Europeans" (Bjelić 2018: 2), with the less civilized located east and south. This is despite the fact that the region has been subjected to civilizational othering by European powers. Baker (2018) highlights ambiguous ways[18] in which the Balkans identify with Europe as a space of modernity, civilization, and whiteness but also draws attention to analogies that exist between "Balkanness" and "blackness" in imagined solidarity,[19] as well as the race-blind anti-colonialism of Yugoslav non-alignment. As Bjelić (2018) highlights, although a critical discourse on race barely exists because Eastern Europe and the Balkans did not have and never were colonies, the region "has been as entangled in global 'raciality' as any other part of the planet" (Baker 2018). Bjelić (2018: 907) argues that "by becoming a part of the EU's legal system, the Balkans cannot any longer claim colonial and racial exceptionalism."

I argue that constructions of race and whiteness remain deeply unexplored in Croatia, specifically in the context of encounters with newly arrived and racialized migrants. I found that not only was whiteness assumed among Croatians in Zagreb, but it was also mostly pre-reflexive and unspoken prior to contact with these other groups. Some of these contacts do result in greater associations of Croatia with European civilization vis-à-vis the new migrants, similar to the findings of Fox and Mogilnicka (2019), who argue that Eastern European migrants in the UK use racism to insert themselves more favorably into Britain's racialized status hierarchies.

However, while assertions of Croatian whiteness in relation to non-European migrants have implied that the country has so far been racially homogeneous, a deeper investigation into how difference is negotiated reveals a more complex picture in Dugave, which showcases legacies of "mixedness" in terms of class, nationality, ethnicity, and religion. However, before delving into the ways this discourse manifested in Dugave, this implication of racial homogeneity versus other forms of heterogeneity, as well as of race as a fundamental concept, is too simplistic and requires further analysis.

Categorizations based on phenotypic traits, ancestry, heritage, language, and cultural characteristics are context-dependent and lack neat boundaries or hierarchical order. Certain groups may be classified as both a race and an ethnicity, while others as ethnicities within a race group. Furthermore, Bjelić (2018) argues that class and

18 See Bjelić (2018) for a genealogy of Balkan discourses on race. For another nuance in terms of ambiguity in racial discourses on the Balkans, see Yeoman's (2007: 110–115) discussion of discourses that add an oriental dimension to Croatian identity by considering its origins to be Iranian. See also Božić-Vrbančić (2006) for an account of Croatians categorized as "non-white" in New Zealand, and even as "dirty whites" or "black fellows." Cf. Wolff (1994: 332–355) for the role of race in the invention of Eastern Europe.

19 See, for example, the parallels drawn between balkanitude and négritude by Jović Humphrey (2014). Studies of "whiteness" have pointed out "shades of whiteness" as race intersects with class, ethnicity, gender, and nationality (Moore 2013), noting that some individuals and cultures are "not quite white." As Razsa and Lindstrom (2004) argue, Croatia's position in global symbolic geography proved to be quite changeable.

ethnicity have been instrumentalized as race in the struggle over sovereign space in the Balkans.[20] Nevertheless, racializing prejudice has a longer history even in this context, as exemplified by majority attitudes towards Roma minorities, which Sardelić (2014) depicts as a form of cultural racism. Moreover, extreme xenophobic narratives against groups classified as nations or ethnicities, like Serbs or Albanians, may emphasize stereotypical physical characteristics, such as certain facial features or skin tones, which can contribute to the racialization of the group. The often-referenced narrative about "Blacks and Arabs in Dugave" also exemplifies the instability of these attempts at categorization. One is a racial label primarily based on phenotypic characteristics such as skin color, and the other is based on geography, history, religion, and language, although it may reference certain physical features as well.

"A Strange Pot of Everything": Dugave's Old and New "Mixedness"

The influx of migrants into Hotel Porin has brought increased diversity to the neighborhood, building up the narrative of Croatia as a previously homogeneous country. Nationalist and racist discourses opposing migration often evoke notions of community disruption and idealize a pre-migration era as harmonious and homogeneous (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991). However, a closer look at everyday life in Dugave and the history of Novi Zagreb presents a more nuanced picture of heterogeneity and perceptions of danger.

In January 2017, I met Anton in a bar. He was a 30-year-old local from Zagreb who had lived in Dugave for many years before recently moving out. He worked as a barman. According to Anton, great wealth, great poverty, and everything in between can be found in Dugave. He confirmed to me what I had also heard elsewhere, that Dugave had a strong presence of Bad Blue Boys, fans of the Croatian football club GNK Dinamo Zagreb who were often reported to be intolerant of migrants. Anton emphasized the national and religious mixedness, mainly with regard to the Bosnian Muslim community, as well as the presence of crime and drugs, and the influence of peripheral villages in terms of what he depicted as a "more rural mentality." It was common in the bars to see people with very different socioeconomic backgrounds sitting together at a table. He explained, "Like, 38 to 42-year-olds, who grew up together, and now one is an electrotechnician. His friend is a loan shark. The third friend is some kind of a 'kombinator,' like a smuggler, and the fourth friend has a PhD." Describing this as "surreal," a blend of everything, Anton continued, "But, then again, on the other hand, people are very close there, because somehow they are together in shit, everybody in the hood, separated from the city. […] A strange pot of everything. I can't even explain it to you."

20 Utilizing Foucault's distinction between internal and external colonialism, Bjelić (2018) argues that the Balkan "race" is a "thing" of discourse rather than a "thing" of nature.

Anton's account illustrated some of the ways daily life was experienced in the neighborhood. I also heard many different stories and descriptions about Dugave as a safe, family-friendly place from residents who would have been surprised by these descriptions. This implies that the portrayal of Dugave solely as a hotspot for crime, drugs, and violence is just one facet among many. However, these depictions may overlap in certain cases, as exemplified in my encounter with Ksenija, an active resident of Dugave, a mother, and a refugee from Bosnia herself who was involved with helping the new asylum seekers. She told me how she just recently discovered this other side of Dugave: "There was this incident with the junkies' syringe in the neighborhood, a little girl that got stung in the preschool playground. […] People say that [the junkies] have their spots, some say we need more police, and the patrols have increased because of Porin. My children are still small, so I haven't really started to deal with this topic yet."

The themes of national and socioeconomic heterogeneity, solidarity, precarity, crime, and violence in Anton's narrative hint at the processes related to the construction, as well as the dissolution, of the Yugoslav socialist project in the city. The construction of Novi Zagreb began in the 1950s[21] as a solution to increasing urbanization and immigration into the city by building the so-called residential communities (*stambene zajednice*) of around ten thousand people. These settlements have been characterized as "Yugoslavia writ-small" (Gulin Zrnić 2009: 169), implying their ethnic heterogeneity and following a doctrine of mixing social classes. The Yugoslav ideology of "Brotherhood and Unity" advocated that each national identity be maintained alongside a supranational identity, so the mixedness in Novi Zagreb has always carried an undertone of commonality, which Gulin Zrnić (2009: 168) conceptualizes as "heterogeneous homogeneity." Despite a sense of commonality and local urban belonging in Novi Zagreb, differences persisted, notably the designation of some as immigrants from other parts of the country (*dotepenci)* and others as natives (*starosjedioci),* alongside distinctions based on rural backgrounds, ethnic stigmatization, and recent arrivals (Gulin Zrnić 2009: 19).

With the collapse of Yugoslav socialism and the war that followed independence in the 1990s, as elsewhere in the region, ethnic belonging took on greater importance in Novi Zagreb. Just a few kilometers east of Dugave is the military base known as "Maršalka," named for Marshall Tito. It is where, after the declaration of independence of Croatia and Slovenia in 1991, motorized JNA columns started moving into Slovenia, and the citizens of Zagreb tried to prevent the column from leaving on July 2 by attacking it with Molotov cocktails. I was told by some Dugave residents that this was when the first civilian died in the Homeland War, an event that was related to a strong sense of national identity. During the war, some of the internally displaced people from Vukovar were also accommodated in Hotel Porin, but as I heard, most have left Dugave altogether by now. Some of the residents living near the hotel even compared the "better-behaved" internally displaced people with the current

21 The decision on the urban action plan specifically for Dugave was brought forward in 1975 by the Novi Zagreb municipal assembly (*skupština općine*).

displaced people from outside Europe. Interestingly, one older woman told me that she feels sorry for the new ones (though she felt more sorry for the previous ones) but nevertheless mentioned some of their inappropriate behavior, demonstrating the coexistence of compassion and boundary-making.

Furthermore, because socialist urban planning had not included religious buildings in the city, new churches were built throughout Novi Zagreb and elsewhere in the city in the 1990s, with the church of Saint Matthew still standing in the center of Dugave's main park. Interestingly, because the church is round, some residents would joke that it would only take a minaret to make it into a mosque since Muslim migrants from the Middle East had started to arrive in the neighborhood in increasing numbers. The growing significance of religious and national identity underscores the complexity of boundary-making processes concerning migrants, who are often perceived as different not only in terms of nationality and, in many cases, religion but also in terms of skin tone and cultural traits. These distinctions serve as the foundation for processes of racialization.

Safety and Danger in the "Most Beautiful Neighborhood": Anti-Migrant Hostility, Local Socioeconomic Marginality, and Precarious Masculinity

While living in Dugave, among people who complained it was no longer such a safe place, I often heard rumors about migrants damaging property, harassing women, and destroying the neighborhood. However, upon inquiring deeper into the narratives about danger, I discovered a more complex picture.

"Dugave? It's the most beautiful neighborhood," Petar said to me as we were driving towards Dugave in May 2018. Petar worked as an Uber driver. He was in his early twenties and from Dugave. Many of the Dugave residents I met expressed a strong attachment to their neighborhood, coupled with a sense of pride and solidarity. Generally, people regarded it as a peaceful and safe place with lots of parks and green spaces, the remnants of socialist urban planning. The large park in the middle of Dugave was an important reference point when people evaluated the neighborhood as safe. This perception of safety contradicted the images of Dugave I encountered from other Zagreb residents. In some conversations, when a resident talked about life in Dugave in a positive manner, without referencing the migrants, I would later on ask about their experience with Hotel Porin and asylum seekers. Several people would only then have something to say regarding the disrupted safety, indicating that these worries are not part of their immediate, everyday perceptions of their neighborhood. It also suggests that the perception of migrants can be influenced by discourse, as pointed out by Gregurović et al. (2019), which can reinforce latent biases.

Petar also talked about Dugave's bad reputation when I inquired about it. "Ah. People don't know… If you're not cocky, no one will touch you. Everybody knows

me here. There are problems like everywhere else…" He stopped for a moment, then continued, "Even if someone says something to me, I have an older brother. First, a slap, and if that's not enough, a knockout." The possibility of these kinds of encounters kept some of my friends from central Zagreb away from the peripheral parts of the city, where they perceived violence and hooliganism to be more widespread, and revealed a different picture of how safety was negotiated.

As a new young male resident, an unfamiliar face in the neighborhood, I noticed I was often subject to uncomfortable looks from young local men in Dugave. Petar probably did not have this problem because "everybody knew him." The only person I knew there told me not to worry about it and that they were just checking me out, wondering who I was or, at worst, whether I was dealing drugs where someone else was selling. Unlike Petar, I and other newcomers lacked the connections and experience of growing up in the neighborhood that made him feel safe. However, unlike migrant newcomers, Petar and I shared the same nationality and were the same age. Street encounters of this type reminded me of encounters in the neighborhood in Croatia where I had grown up in the 1990s and early 2000s, where older brothers expected to be treated with respect and not arrogance by visitors to the neighborhood, and there was an underlying chance of macho physical aggression. Both younger and older men mentioned that delinquent activities were less prevalent compared to the years following the 1990s war, characterizing it as a phenomenon of the post-war generation.[22] However, I heard multiple accounts of how young local men attacked the migrants. Many local men and women of different ages and socioeconomic backgrounds claimed that the migrants were disrespectful or ungrateful, which they exemplified with accounts of their behavior in public spaces, such as polluting, taking up space on the bus, being loud, or looking at women.

As I mentioned, Dugave is a result of the politics of mixing during socialism, whose legacy lives on. Therefore, it is a site of complexity and polyphony, and while it is hard to generalize, for example, that lower-class citizens necessarily have more negative views of the migrants, as demographic variables intersect with spatial relations, individual encounters, ideological background, and exposure to rumors, I had noticed that more educated people were generally more tolerant of asylum seekers (Cf. Ajduković et al. 2019: 26). The more upper-class residents[23] regarded these men associated with hooliganism and anti-migrant sentiments with contempt, describing them as "losers," "hoodlums," "hooligans," or, in local jargon, "badgers" (*jazavci*). My friend from Dugave, who had studied at university and had lived abroad, said she did not spend much time in the neighborhood and not among such people that she described as "pregnant hairdressers" and people in a rut, wasting their lives in

22 The perceptions of danger of this sort are therefore not exclusive to Dugave nor the contemporary period. Kalapoš (1996) analyzes the so-called post-WW2 "Martićevci" gang of the 1960s and 1970s in central Zagreb as a youth subculture while pointing out fighting, the importance of territory, and acting like a guest outside one's home area.

23 There is even an area within Dugave that people call "Beverly Hills," where the wealthier live, including some celebrities. However, it is quite close to Hotel Porin which complicates the hypothesis that higher socioeconomic status generates more positive attitudes towards the migrants.

Dugave. She said, "They haven't moved from the spot," insinuating that the type and range of their urban mobility reflected their social immobility. She contrasted them with her own life, with a university degree and an office job in the city center, where she usually stayed after work.

Despite the sense of safety surrounding Dugave, for some residents, its spaces were infused with perceptions of danger and the potential for aggression. These emerged in the relations and encounters between locals and migrants, but it is important to highlight that certain narratives of danger precede the arrival of migrants, even though they received most of the blame for the neighborhood's dangerous reputation. These issues, associated mainly with young men and criminals connected to the socio-spatial marginality exacerbated by post-war and postsocialist transformations, were historically inscribed in the neighborhood.[24]

While there is no existing research on links between these processes, masculinity, and anti-migrant sentiments, Dumančić and Krolo (2016: 154) point out the re-traditionalizing of society and gender roles during the Yugoslav wars of succession and argue that the "generalized instability attending new market economies and post-war political turmoil have indeed created a context where national gender norms have entered a state of flux." This insight needs to be taken into account when trying to understand the findings that men in Croatia tend to have more xenophobic views than women towards migrants (Baričević and Koska 2017). A common claim against migrants is that "they look at/attack *our* women." I argue that some of the hostility towards the migrants in Dugave was an effect of the social changes which had produced "precarious masculinities" (cf. McDowell 2003). Insecurity and resentment may drive hostility as a means for some men to reaffirm their identity or status amid social and economic changes (Kimmel 2013).[25]

Another issue that endangered residents' sense of safety, and which also preceded migrant arrivals, is related to the general presence of crime. When discussing the presence of drugs, mob members, robberies of post offices, and smugglers of goods (šverceri), people usually used the term *periferija* to tie it all together. The implication was that life on the edge of the city is under less control of the government authorities,[26] yields fewer opportunities, and generates informality in terms of economic structures (smuggling and drug dealing). This general context potentially breeds crime and violence.

As I drove towards Dugave after the gym with Marko, a 26-year-old who had attended school in Dugave but now lived in the adjacent neighborhood, he told me an example of an incident unrelated to the migrants. "Over there," he said, pointing

24 Discussions about violence, drugs, and delinquency in the neighborhood often refer to the presence of football hooligans and adolescent men from the youth facility ("Centar za pružanje usluga u zajednici") in Dugave.

25 This article, however, does not argue that hostility towards migrants in Dugave is only due to precarious masculinities nor that these findings should be generalized to explain attitudes in Dugave more generally. Rather, it is one understudied aspect of anti-migrant sentiments and has been a focus of my study, partially influenced by my positionality as a young male researcher.

26 It should be highlighted that this discourse referenced the period before the asylum seekers' arrivals increased police presence.

to a crossroad, "one guy got stabbed and sliced from kidney to kidney in his bowels a few months ago. Yeah, the guy left him to die in a ditch… It's a neighborhood full of criminals and drug dealers." Marko also said that the number of these incidents reduced after the 1990s, highlighting that some of these guys got imprisoned or married and calmed down. While a more detailed examination of the pre-existing crime and informality on the city's periphery is outside the scope of this article, it is interesting to observe how the dynamics of these stories and a sense of safety were negotiated in relation to the presence of asylum seekers.

When I moved into Dugave, I asked the taxi driver, a man in his late fifties who had lived there for more than 30 years, if the rumors about crime were true. After a pause, he said, "You know why it's like that… there, not far from you is, if you've heard, this Porin, where the refugees and other scum are. That's why there's a lot of police and all that." He did not share the opinion that crime rates preceded the arrival of migrants and instead linked danger and crime to their actions. People in local bars told me that Dugave had always had a reputation of being "a kind of a ghetto" place, but the presence of asylum seekers had "raised the level," as one young man described it to me. Interestingly, a waitress in the local bar told me half-jokingly, "Whenever there's some problem, people say it's their fault, but you know, this is the type of neighborhood where everybody is like that [problematic]." She gave examples of break-ins residents had assumed were the work of asylum seekers, but it had later transpired that Croatian citizens were responsible. Similar were some narratives regarding sexual assaults. A young woman told me she knew of a case where a Croatian man had committed rape. Another woman said she does not feel safe even when ten Croatian men are walking in a group at night. While, for some, these comparisons were proof that the new migrants "are not as bad as people complain," for others, the offenses committed by the migrants seemed more emotionally charged and demonstrated their ungratefulness. Stories of criminal behavior among the newcomers were somehow marked as different, "proof" of savagery, and was often essentialized as a cultural trait of particular peoples such as "Muslims," "Arabs," or "Moroccans."

In conclusion, Dugave's history of migration, mixedness, and peripherality, characterized by life on the edge of the city and a prolonged presence of activities on the fringes of the law, had provided frameworks to partially accommodate new differences and related issues. However, socioeconomic factors of marginality, compounded by postsocialist and post-war changes, especially among lower strata and young men, and the emerging racializing prejudice had created a fertile ground for hostility. This section also highlights that racialized attitudes are not monolithic but are instead shaped by a range of emotions and historical comparisons. Blaming the migrants, even when unjustified, suggests that racialization is a process influenced by preconceived biases, yet among some residents, these are susceptible to negotiation in relation to issues within the group. Perceptions of safety and danger fluctuate based on age, gender, class, situational context, and specific incidents. These examples illustrate that racialization in Dugave is a negotiated and dynamic process characterized by frequent oscillation in attitudes and perceptions towards migrants.

Conclusion

This article investigated how historical inscriptions, migration, and socioeconomic changes have influenced residents' perceptions of safety and subsequent racialization as Dugave, a neighborhood in Zagreb, became a transit and arrival point for large numbers of non-European asylum seekers and asylees. It is important to note that this research and its interpretation refer specifically to the period of 2017–2018. Since then, there have been significant changes in Dugave, as well as in Zagreb and Croatia, more broadly, due to an increase in working migrants from Asia.

The article demonstrated how residents actively construct and negotiate urban meanings in relation to transnational discourses of race, gender, local history, rumors, and affective encounters. To scrutinize the talk of "dangerous *azilanti*" that is widespread in the city, I have described the way Dugave's residents talked about it in relation to feelings of safety and danger. I emphasized not only that these coexisted but that the perceived threats to safety had preceded the new migrants. Their presence produced a racializing discourse and ways to obscure a plethora of issues related to life on the city's periphery and to the postsocialist and postwar transformations. This context also allowed for the partial reduction of social distance.

Despite the presence of racializing discourses, some residents of Dugave displayed hospitality towards asylum seekers, indicating that not all interactions were marked by hostility and that racialization is only one of the responses. Tolerance, although present, was often fragile and conditional. Periods of calm and reduced visibility of migrants led to greater tolerance among residents. However, this tolerance could be quickly undermined by incidents or rumors. Many residents were indifferent to the presence of migrants, neither actively supporting nor opposing them.

Moreover, people often combined neutral or even positive attitudes toward migrants with the use of more subtle forms of racialization. While these are very important aspects of life in Dugave, a more detailed discussion of other forms of orienting towards the migrants is outside the scope of this article, as a conscious decision was made to focus on the emergence of racialization. This research interest was further strengthened in the course of fieldwork due to my positionality as a male researcher in his late twenties. This shaped my network of contacts, vision of themes in the field, and analysis. While the dominant voices in this article are men in their 20s and 30s, its findings suggest that racialization is a highly gendered phenomenon, requiring further studies to explore its manifestation and variations in other demographics to unravel additional complexities.

Given Dugave's location on the periphery of the city and Croatia's position on the external border of the EU, the study sought to contextualize its findings within the framework of peripherality while highlighting the entangled relationships among different peripheral selves (Majstorović 2023) along the continuum of precarity. However, this approach does not suggest that the racialization analyzed in Dugave is solely attributable to its spatial positioning or that it serves as a universal model for understanding the relationship between migration and marginalization.

The findings should not be construed as a one-size-fits-all explanation of Croatian responses to new migration. Rather, racialization emerges from the intersections of colonial legacies, global migration patterns and ideas of race, local and regional histories, economic structures, legal systems, media discourses, social interactions, and community relations. Further research should extend beyond Dugave, with comparative studies shedding light on how spatial dynamics and local histories influence daily interactions and shape the meanings associated with migration.

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''U Dugavama? Tamo s azilantima?''. Rasifikacija i promjenjivi diskursi miješanosti i sigurnosti na periferiji Zagreba

Ova etnografska studija istražuje transformaciju Dugava, četvrti u (Novom) Zagrebu, fokusirajući se na rasifikaciju i percepciju sigurnosti u kontekstu neeuropske migracije. Analizirajući urbana značenja i povijesne narative, istraživanje analizira razgovore o "azilantima", pretpostavke o hrvatskoj bijelosti te otkriva slojeve miješanosti u Dugavama. Članak naglašava suživot percepcija sigurnosti i opasnosti, istražujući rodnu dinamiku društveno-prostorne marginalizacije u vezi s kriminalom, drogama i huliganizmom koji su ukorijenjeni u postsocijalističkim i poslijeratnim Dugavama. Studija podcrtava potrebu za proučavanjem nijansi smještaja migranata kao ukorijenjenih u lokalnim povijestima i globalnim rasificiranim hijerarhijama.

Ključne riječi: balkanska ruta, Dugave, tražitelji azila, rasifikacija, sigurnost